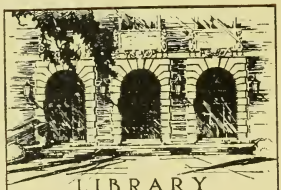
A Modern Dick Whittington

James Pope



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A MODERN
DICK WHITTINGTON:

OR,

A PATRON OF LETTERS.

BY

JAMES PAYN,

AUTHOR OF "LOST SIR MASSINGBERD," "BY PROXY," &c. &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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A MODERN DICK WHITTINGTON.

CHAPTER I.

OVER THE WALL.

"So Sir Charles is coming to Hillsland, I hear, Lorry?"

"Yes, for a day or two."

The question and answer were both as indifferent as the human voice could make them. The speakers, in fact, had been talking of something else, of far more importance to both of them, but unhappily they were not agreed upon it. Kate Salesby and Lawrence Merridew were as old friends as their united ages—which were but one-and-forty—permitted them to be, but of late they had differed—though they had never "fallen out"—upon one subject.

The young woman was the elder, and she

looked it. Her tall figure, though far from plump, was fully developed; her face, which but for the kiss of the sun, from which she had taken little pains to protect herself, would have borne comparison with that of any fashionable beauty, had a sedate expression which, while it became her admirably, suggested discretion. It was well for her, one would say, that under the present circumstances she possessed it. The young fellow who was her companion, though by no means so handsome for a man as she for a woman, had great personal attractions. His appearance was peculiar; he had fair curling hair, a delicately chiselled face of bronze, and very dark eyes. Such a contrast might not itself have suited every taste, but the expression of the face was charming; full of intelligence, sympathising, demonstrative, and but a moment ago fervent with passionate appeal. Under the spell of such eloquence of feature, it would have been difficult for any woman, not unsexed, to have resisted him, and it had cost even Kate Salesby a struggle.

As she cast down her beautiful eyes under his passionate glance, they had, however, fallen

upon his boots, which, being patched and old, reminded her of certain obstacles to his prayer, absolutely insurmountable, but which for the moment she had almost forgotten. To strengthen her resolve, though it gave her pain, she compelled herself as he went on to take an inventory of his apparel. It had never been of good material, and it was mended—very neatly, but still mended—in half-a-dozen places; even his "wideawake" was frayed at the edges; and it was wonderful (she thought to herself) how well nevertheless he looked. Few, few indeed are the human countenances that can overcome the effect of a bad hat, and yet Lawrence Merridew overcame it. He looked a gentleman and something more and much more, as the girl vaguely recognised, for all the shortcomings of his clothes.

She was but poorly dressed herself, as one of her own sex would have pronounced at once; there were no patches, however, and if she had stood "in silk attire," instead of that simple print, she could not have looked more distinguished. It is strange how often we hear of Nature's noblemen, when Nature's noblewomen, who are much more often met with, are alto-

gether ignored. So far as birth was concerned, however, Kate was much the superior of her companion, for she belonged to one of the oldest families in Cornwall—so old, indeed, that it had worn itself out; whereas the Merridews were *nouveaux riches*, only Lawrence was *nouveau* and not *riche*, as will be presently made plain.

"What you suggest, my dear Lorry," she had been saying, after that review of his raiment, "for I will not call it by so serious a name as a proposal, is out of the question; it is a dream—delightful, I confess, to me as to you—but from which, as matters stand, were we to indulge in it, we should have indeed a rude awakening. Of your truth and honour I have no doubt; I believe every word you say to me; nay, since you press me, I do not deny that I love you; but love does not blind me as it blinds you. I look—it may seem cruel to you, but I am cruel only to be kind—beyond to-day and even to-morrow. It is my nature, perhaps, to do so, but I have had also a bitter home experience of what comes of *not* looking forward—of trusting to that something good to happen to us which never does happen. How beautiful is this

orchard in which we are now standing; how bright and beautiful are these apple blossoms; how cool the long grasses on which we tread; how laden with the coming summer is the air we breathe! But before the year is out these trees will be bare, and their fruit fallen; the ground will be a swamp; it will be difficult to recognise the spot which the spring and the sunlight make so charming to us. So it would be, almost as soon, with your love story if I were weak enough to listen to it; its passion would have passed away, its glory would have faded, through no fault of yours or mine. Poverty—abject poverty—would have blighted it. It is true you only ask for a promise; but when that is given, how hard it will be to deny you more!"

"I will ask no more, Kitty," he broke in earnestly. "I will be content with your promise."

"You think so now, but you would not think so then; moreover, I should not be content to wait for you indefinitely. I know there are women who, when once they have confessed their love, would be content to wait; but I do

not possess their nobility of soul. There is, moreover, another thing, Lorry, you would do well to consider; you rate me too high, you credit me with virtues I do not possess."

"You are good enough for me, Kitty, at all events," he answered gently, "and much better than I deserve."

"I do not say that, though I have no mean opinion of myself. You will be a husband of whom—one day—any woman should be proud; but under present circumstances you are not, as my father would say, 'good enough.' The very thought of him, and the pass to which poverty has brought him and me, hardens my heart against you, Lorry."

She did not look "hard;" her face was full of tenderness, though her voice was firm and even cold. He put his arm out—for he was close by her—to clasp her waist, but she drew back.

"No, Lorry," she said, "not again, nor perhaps ever again. This has gone far enough. I will not be fooled by my own fancy."

"Fancy!" he exclaimed reproachfully. "Do you call your love for me by such a name as that?"

"What other name can better suit it? What is it, as I have said, but a pleasant dream? We are penniless, you and I; and only not beggars because there is no one in the whole wide world to whom we can sue for help. In a little time you will have left England, with what hope of coming back again a prosperous man I need not ask you. Your calling has been chosen for you, and is a distasteful one; and fortunes are not made that way. Yet you wish me to promise to wait here for years and years until you have made one. There is one chance, to be sure, beside. Perhaps your grandfather may provide for you; perhaps, as my father says when he is merry—that is when he is not sober—the heavens may fall, and we may have lark pie for supper. Is your grandfather so fond of you? Is your Uncle Robert, who rules him, likely to advocate your claims upon him? You do not, I know, hope that your mother will die, that you may inherit her scanty income. What is your hope then? What is the lot in life—at its best, at its brightest—you ask me to share?"

She spoke without contempt, but like one

who is conscious that his arguments are irresistible.

The young man bowed his head before them, as though before some physical force.

"You forget that I have my pen," he murmured plaintively.

"Indeed, I do not forget it. Your fine brain, and the fancies that inhabit it, are not the least among the many things for which I love and admire you. I am no judge of such matters, it is true, but I believe you have great talents; nay, since among such surroundings and discouragements you exercise them as you do, it may be even genius that you possess; but even if you do, what then? Genius, as my father says of a goose, is too much for one but not enough for two. It turns a man's head, but not the kitchen spit. Geniuses, even the best of them, are poor, dear Lorry, and setting aside other considerations, better without wives."

"But although I may never be rich, Kitty, I may yet make money, by writing, sufficient for our simple needs."

The girl's lips curled at this; she was not enamoured of such simplicity; "the root and

the spring" were too familiar to her to be attractive; but her companion thought that she was expressing incredulity of his literary powers, and it cut him to the heart.

"I believe I have a better chance with my pen than you think, Kitty," he answered gently.

"I did not mean *that*," she replied earnestly, and with a quick flush. "You do not think, you surely do not think, that I was making—well, making light of your talents, Lorry darling; you may think me hard and mercenary, but I am not like that."

She stepped forward with tears in her eyes and kissed his cheek. It was a dangerous impulse; the young fellow had been gradually quieting down under his companion's judicious treatment, and it brought about a relapse.

"You do love me a little, then, after all?" he exclaimed triumphantly.

"I love you so much, Lorry, that I will not permit you to ruin yourself for my sake."

"Yes, yes," he answered impatiently. "I understand all that, though I do not agree with it; but what I mean is, if I have a little

luck in literature, if I make enough before I go abroad to be an earnest of better fortune——"

She shook her head. "That will not do, Lorry," she put in resolutely. "That would be promise and not performance, which is the very thing you propose to exact from me."

"But if I made enough by my pen in England within the year—such an income as would do away with the necessity of my going to Singapore at all—would you give me your promise then?"

"What! If you made an income before you were twenty-one years of age? Well, there can be no harm in saying 'Yes' to that, because it would be a miracle, and miracles do not happen. You no more expect such a thing than I do."

"Still, I have your promise," he answered—it must be confessed, in no very hopeful tone.

"My poor Lorry, it can be but the promise of a promise, the shadow of a shadow; but such as it is you are welcome to it. Now let us give over this unprofitable talk and discourse of something else."

And then it was that she had put the ques-

tion about Sir Charles Walden's coming to Hillsland; and he had answered that his stay would be for a day or two. She continued in an amused tone—

"And what is supposed to be Sir Charles's attraction?"

Lawrence shrugged his shoulders. He had really given little thought to the matter, but the indifference born of his present condition—disappointed, denied, almost rejected as he felt himself to be—would have prevented him giving any subject his attention.

"I understand he wishes to make the acquaintance of my grandfather."

At this the young girl burst out laughing; bright and merry as a bugle horn the music of her merriment clove the air; it was no guffaw such as man, coarse man, indulges in when his sense of humour is inordinately tickled, but yet "so clear and far" it sped that it set the echo that lived in the old lichened wall on the other side of the orchard replying to it.

"You really think that, do you?" she exclaimed, when she got her breath. "Then it will be a sin and a shame indeed, Lorry, if the

old fellow leaves you no legacy. Such a compliment deserves a codicil all to itself. Is it likely that his High Mightiness Sir Charles Walden, as learned as the Bishop, though he says his prayers backwards, as fastidious as Lord Chesterfield, and a dandy——" She suddenly stopped.

"Pray go on," said Lawrence, with his eyes on the ground, and as though all talk was now alike to him; "why don't you complete your description of the gentleman's character?"

As she remained dumb, he looked up and saw the reason. Kitty had taken to her heels, and was running down to the gate at the bottom of the orchard like a hare; but over the wall, within three feet of him, were the head and bust of Sir Charles Walden himself—a phenomenon caused by his being on horseback. He had been riding on the turf by the side of the road, which had dulled the noise of his approach, and how long he had been in his present position—with his hat off, in courtesy doubtless to the fair speaker—it was impossible to guess.

CHAPTER II.

THE FRANKNESS OF YOUTH.

"FORGIVE me for my intrusion, Mr. Lawrence, for I fear I *have* intruded," said the horseman, with a smile and a bow, but in taking a short cut to your esteemed grandfather's house, I have, as often happens with short cuts, gone a little astray; perhaps you will kindly put me in the right way."

The graciousness of the tone, the polish of the speech, could not have been exceeded; the face of the speaker, too, beamed with politeness, but there was a twinkle in his eye which to Lawrence was terrible, for it said, "All is known to me, my amorous youth."

To young people of the middle-class, everybody with a title, especially in the country, has a certain importance; but upon Lawrence Merridew (who was unusually exempt from such weak-

nesses) the lord lieutenant of the county himself would have made little impression as an involuntary confidante compared with Sir Charles Walden, quite apart from the fact that he had just heard himself called "a dandy" and other injurious epithets. The baronet was a very remarkable person indeed, and one whose rank and wealth formed but a small portion of his eminence. Lawrence, though it seemed the other knew even his Christian name, had met him but once on a public occasion—a village flower show—but he knew all about him (or, rather, thought he knew), like everyone else in West Cornwall. As learned, as Kitty had said (only with that unfortunate addition about his prayers), as the Bishop of the diocese, more polite than anyone who had ever been heard of except in books, and fitted equally to shine at a meeting of the Royal Society or in a ball-room, Sir Charles Walden was a recluse, though far, far indeed, from being an ascetic. He was said in one sense—the county sense—to "live alone" at Hurlby Castle, because he discouraged all visitors; but scandal painted him as by no means without society of a certain kind, and as

having more than one reason—indeed, a whole seraglio of them—for seclusion. Nobody knew whether it was true or not, because nobody ever got the chance of knowing.

He had been a great traveller, but for years had never left his splendid home, though he was understood to still maintain relations with the great world without, including the highest in the land; in what was, comparatively speaking, his youth, he had formed one of her Majesty's Ministers, in a subordinate post, it is true, but filled with such success and completeness as promised the highest honours in the future. At the same time he had been one of the most prominent figures (though not, perhaps, the most popular, for his cynicism forbade it) in society; the idol of that courtly circle where wit shines the brighter for the atmosphere of dulness in which it shines, and where what is not conventional seems almost to resemble genius; a patron of the turf; as audacious at the gaming table (it was said of him) as though he had the Bank of England at his back; a man of gallantry; a lover of the muse; a pamphleteer and something more in

letters; in short, within limits, an Admirable Crichton.

Then suddenly—none knew for certain why, except, of course, that a woman was at the bottom of it—the gay world knew its *persona grata* no more. Sir Charles fled the town, and after years of travel buried himself alive in his distant and secluded castle. For the moment his departure made him more talked about than ever, but in a few days his story paled and faded as in a dissolving view, before some other London scandal, and save in a few discreet boudoirs, or snug smoking-rooms, was discussed no more. In the country, however, it was different. His very naughtiness (if he *had* been naughty) was an attraction where gossip found so little to feed upon. Bluebeard himself, we read, was not unpopular among the county families till the actual revelation of his crimes; and Sir Charles was known to be unmarried, which immensely added to his prestige. There were probably very few young ladies in Cornwall who would not have been prepared to put up with a little eccentricity and to forgive a few vague peccadilloes, in exchange for thirty thousand a year and a castle. It

could not, indeed, be said of Sir Charles, as in the ballad, that he was "over young to marry yet," but he was "admirably preserved," as if for that very purpose. "A woman," it is said, "is as old as she looks." If that test had been applied to Sir Charles as he now sat upright on his three hundred guinea nag, attired in a perfectly-fitting riding-suit, he was forty-five at most. If he had been a labouring man, in smock frock and hobnailed boots, with the usual amount of rheumatism about his bent shoulders, he would have been twenty years older.

To Lawrence's eyes this man looked like one who, save for the stroke of death, was above the reach of Fate; he had everything at his command of which he himself had nothing. Power, worship, wealth, accomplishments, learning, knowledge of mankind; and he felt not a little complimented that so exalted a personage should have addressed him by his Christian name. The recognition of a face, the recollection of a name, was one of the many gifts of Sir Charles, and one which before now had stood him in good stead. He well understood that the very humblest of human beings has a respect for his own identity,

and that a slight is more resented than an insult; for the latter may be given in the heat of passion, whereas the former can only arise from habitual contempt. He had set his foot on many an enemy, but never made one by disdain. He was a cynic to his backbone, but he sneered only at principles, not at those who acted on them. His conduct was exactly the reverse of those who "do not speak evil of dignities, but of the people who fill them." Such was his attitude to the world at large; but when he disliked anyone his tongue was a flail. It was never said of him, however, as of many persons, that he was pleasant when pleased, because (which is a very different thing) he was always pleasant unless displeased; his charm of manner was inadequately described as capable of "luring the bird from the bough"—it could lure her from her very nest; he was said to have once extracted five pounds for the poor from the vicar of Hillsland's pocket—a feat which could only be appreciated by those who knew that ecclesiastic. With the recollection of all these things (but of that especially) in his mind, Lawrence vaulted lightly over the wall, and in answer to

the other's request to be put in the way to Hillsland Hall, replied cheerfully, "I am at your service, Sir Charles." Many a true word is spoken in jest, and sometimes, as in this case, in mere courtesy.

"It is curious, considering how long I have been in this part of the country, that I have never but once been inside your grandfather's house," observed the baronet, as they moved on slowly together, his fiery but well-trained steed at once accommodating itself to the pace of the pedestrian. "But I am as difficult to be drawn from my hermitage as a badger. It struck me as being a very imposing mansion indeed."

"It is big enough," answered the young fellow in a tone the indifference of which bordered on contempt.

"And holds a good many people, I understand."

"Oh, yes, it has tenants enough." The tone had now turned absolutely sarcastic, and seemed to imply the addition, "and to spare."

"Why, you speak of it, my young friend, as

if it was a warren," exclaimed Sir Charles, with great amusement.

"It *is* a warren, though it looks like a lunatic asylum," returned the other doggedly.

"Now this is really interesting," said the baronet, as if to himself. "You are the very person of all others, my dear sir, I wanted to meet with; intelligent, observant, and straightforward. A little bird has told me all that of you before, and more, but I suspected exaggeration."

"A little bird!" echoed the youth, with a puzzled look.

"Well, yes, if an angel, though wingless, may be so termed. It was Miss Ruth Stratton, with whom I had some charming conversation on the same day that I had the pleasure of making your own acquaintance."

"It was fortunate for me that it was Cousin Ruth who gave you my character," answered the young fellow. "If it had been any other of my relations (save my dear mother), you would not feel much inclined to be civil to me."

"I don't know that; I am in the habit of

judging character for myself," said Sir Charles smiling. "Moreover, when one man gives an ill report of another, it has to be considered what his opinion is worth. One may say to me, 'So-and-so is an idle young fellow, who will never make sixpence,' for instance, and I may ask myself, 'But how does *he* know?' He may not be very diligent in his own vocation, and have lost a good many sixpences when he thought to make them himself."

"That was the parson," observed Lawrence composedly.

"Well guessed; yes, it was the Rev. Arthur Grueby. Why should I not say so, since so far from the information being given in confidence, it was obviously for distribution. But he is not a relation, I presume; only a candid friend of yours."

"He is a friend of the family, at all events, a standing dish at the Hall. You will be sure to meet him at dinner to-night."

"A charming prospect! But we were speaking of your relatives, 'a little more than kin and less than kind,' as you tell me, and indeed, thanks to the little bird, I know, of

course: I wish to hear no secrets, but if you will give me the *carte du pays*—for these good folk are almost entire strangers to me, and you and I are already friends I feel—I should be infinitely obliged to you. Now, there is your Uncle Robert ——"

"There is unfortunately, yes," interrupted Lawrence bitterly.

"So bad as that, is it? He struck me chiefly (like one better known in society) as being a very tall man; but he has doubtless other characteristics."

"I would rather you discovered them for yourself, sir. I cannot trust myself to speak of Robert Stratton as he deserves." The speaker's voice trembled with emotion, the nature of which could be read in his flashing eyes and knitted brow.

Sir Charles leant forward in his saddle and laid his hand gently on his companion's shoulder—

"Forgive me, Lawrence, for touching so tender a chord. It is one of the painful riddles of the world that sensitive natures should so often be at the mercy of those of coarser fibre—

in other words, of mere brutes. It happens, however, constantly to the female sex, and they give us a noble example of patience and endurance. That is a philosophic reflection, you may well observe, that can do no good to anybody; let us rather hope that a time may come when you may have an opportunity of repaying this gentleman for his many obligations. Now as to grandpapa, who is nominally, at least, my host; what am I likely to make of him?"

"I know nothing about him," replied Lawrence indifferently, "except that he wears a long white beard and a skull-cap, and looks like a magician. He is much too great a personage to trouble himself about my existence. I have hardly seen him a dozen times in my life."

"What! Not seen your own grandfather, who lives under the same roof?"

"Not three times for the last six months."

"This is really delightful," said Sir Charles with an air of exceeding relish. "I wouldn't have missed it for worlds. By-the-bye, I hope I shall not miss your grandfather; it was the

prospect of his society with which your uncle lured me to Hillsland."

"Oh, he'll see *you* quick enough, no doubt. It is only that it is not worth his while to see people generally, but secludes himself in his own apartments. He was a very great man in the East, it seems, indeed."

"Really! Not the Grand Llama, surely? *He* keeps himself to himself like that."

"He was a Commissioner, I believe."

"A commissionaire?"

"No, no," answered the young fellow, laughing in spite of himself; it was difficult to be cheerless and despondent in Sir Charles's company. "He was the Governor of some Indian province, and he can never forget it. He thinks that all of us ought to salaam and prostrate ourselves before him."

"And *do* you?"

"Those who are admitted to his presence approach it, I believe, on all fours; that is one of the reasons which makes exile from it tolerable to me."

"And has he no favourites?"

"Yes, Ruth enjoys that distinction."

"It is not surprising; she is a charming young woman."

"Yes, but what is remarkable, she actually likes *him*. I say to her sometimes, 'You will be liking Uncle Robert next.'"

"And what does she say to that?"

"Oh, then she only laughs; because, of course, such a thing is impossible."

"But there is a Mrs. Robert Stratton, is there not? Doesn't she like her husband?"

"Adores him."

"Come, that shows there must be some good in your uncle, after all."

"Not at all. It only shows my aunt is a fool."

"Well, upon my life, young gentleman, for candour——"

"I beg your pardon, and her pardon," put in Lawrence impulsively. "I had no right to say anything of the kind. The notion of people liking Uncle Robert puts me out of all patience with them; but his wife is delicate and tender-hearted, and believes in her husband, who I must say takes a great deal of care of her, though doubtless for some wicked end."

"You are a good hater, Master Lawrence," said Sir Charles, with a keen glance at his young companion.

"I have good cause to be," replied the young fellow curtly. "There is the Hall upon your left."

CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND SON.

WHATEVER might be said against Hillsland Hall, it had certainly size to recommend it; no one could call it "a one-horse affair," or even a pair-horse; it was a four-horse van—a caravan—of the first magnitude. As to its architecture, it had something to suit almost every taste, and a great deal that suited none. It was commenced by Mr. Stratton's orders, so that when he arrived in England he should find a mansion suitable to his position and requirements, and the architect who had been entrusted with it had, perhaps in obedience to his patron's injunctions that it should be "light and airy," leant to the Italian style.

It was a palace with a verandah running round it, a hall of great splendour in its centre paved with exquisite mosaic, and as many apart-

ments, all more or less draughty, as an American hotel. The Commissioner had so far approved, but requested that something should be imparted to it to remind the beholder of the gorgeous East. Whereupon certain minarets had been erected side by side with the campanilla, and so much more air introduced that when the shivering proprietor came home to it he found it utterly uninhabitable. Then another architect was called in, who, if he could have had his will, would not have left one stone upon another, but who was obliged to content himself with fronting the pile anew, so that it had the resemblance of a gigantic toy enclosed, for purposes of travel, in a Gothic box. But even that did not keep the draughts from being too much for the Commissioner's delicate frame; he had forgotten during his gilded exile what the English climate was even in Cornwall, and it was brought to his remembrance in a very unpleasant manner. So that within his castle he had, as it were, built another for warmth and comfort—which afterwards turned out very useful for seclusion—a suite of rooms, guarded by double doors hung with heavy curtains, and

paved with carpets on which a horse soldier could have galloped without making the least noise. At first he had gone about a bit, in fear, but of late years had been confined almost entirely to these apartments by age, infirmity, or as some said, by sheer ill-temper at finding himself held by his neighbours in such small account.

When this Satrap had taken the air in his own province, a thousand dusky forms had prostrated themselves before him in token of their awe and submission; whereas at Hillsland, if some rustic pulled his forelock in acknowledgment of his presence, it was the most he could expect. Often as not, Hodge only wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and remarked to his fellow, "That there's the naybob, Jim; him as used to ride a helefant." In former days a languid clap of his hands would be responded to "with obedient start" by a score of servitors; now it only brought old Hassam, the only native who had followed his fortunes to his master's side. On the other hand, it must be confessed that the ex-Commissioner was very much "looked up to" (not perhaps in a moral sense, but as from low to higher, not to say

highest) by his family, which were numerous and of unusually varied stocks. His word was law to them when he condescended so low as to give them a word, which was very seldom. What he had to say in the way of direction and command was said by deputy, through his only surviving son, Mr. Robert Stratton.

This gentleman was his father's right-hand man in every department of life; even his adviser, though he would never have been so foolish as to hint as much; the ex-Commissioner was the Sultan, with the power of life and death, as it were, over all his belongings, and his son was but his Grand Vizier, only he played that part with such consummate skill that he did in fact rule his master. All ordinary transactions the deputy performed with a success that was really considerable, and so far as his master knew to the contrary, absolutely complete; and then those extraordinary ones which seemed to require tact and delicacy he performed too, only without them. For example, he was his father's almoner; every relative who had his home at the Hall—or rather, called it home, for the word was certainly a misnomer—was wholly de-

pendent upon its lord and master, and none ever received their doles without Mr. Robert reminding them of the fact that it was the bread of dependence. He himself, though it was whispered he took good care that his own services were well remunerated, was under no obligation in this respect. He was not indeed rich in his own right, and to say truth had at one time been in very low water indeed; but before the tide had left him absolutely bare and dry he had had the luck to marry an heiress. This had been the initial factor in the ex-Commissioner's respect for him; to find one of his family doing well for himself had filled him with astonishment and admiration; and having once got his foot in the door that led to the old man's confidence, Robert had pushed his way in.

The two were closeted together, when their expected visitor and Lawrence Merridew came in sight of the Hall, in the ex-Commissioner's sanctum. It was a moderate-sized apartment, but furnished with much luxury and even magnificence. On the ceiling's lustrous blue were painted Eastern birds of gorgeous hue which seemed to wing their native skies; on the tall

screens that fenced the occupant from every draught were depicted the sports or pursuits in which he had taken part when engaged in shaking the pagoda tree, a tiger hunt, or a battue of peacocks, the procession of some native prince, or an Indian durbar. The walls were hung with shining spears, matchlocks inlaid with silver, and daggers, their handles rough with gold and bright with jewels. The air of the room was not only oppressively warm to persons in good health, but heavy with the scent of sandal-wood, of which most of the furniture was composed.

The habitual tenant of this chamber was as alien-looking and foreign to our idea of what is English as its contents. He was an old man, as his silver hair and long white beard testified, but a still more convincing witness was the network of wrinkles that covered his sunburnt face from brow to chin; so fine and so numerous were they that they produced the effect of an exquisitely delicate and elaborate tattoo. But under his still black brows his dark eyes sparkled yet, and spoke of the vigour and vitality that were left in him. He was attired in a flowing dressing-gown of

richest silk which, as he lay propped up by cushions on an ebony couch, reached to his scarlet slipper; on his head was a black skull-cap, and between his bloodless lips the amber mouthpiece of a hookah which, with coil on coil, like a serpent shining in the sun, wound itself at last into a glass receptacle at his feet. Only when he spoke was the monotonous "hubble-bubble" of the instrument, to which air and fire and water all contributed, intermitted; it seemed a part of its proprietor's breathing apparatus, and to go on for "ever." In front of his skull-cap sparkled a huge diamond; on his long, brown fingers were rings of the same precious stones; he was immensely fat, and around his middle was a cord of tasselled silk that looked like a girdle of gold. Upon the whole he looked more like some pagod than a man at all, and the more so from the strong contrast his appearance presented to that of his companion and only son.

Robert Stratton was tall and somewhat spare, but very powerfully built. As a young man—and he was now but middle-aged with brown hair still clustering over his forehead untinged

with grey—he must have been handsome, and might have been so still but for a saturnine and almost sinister expression that marred his features. Even when he smiled this did not wholly disappear. It is a provision of nature that after the exercise of certain qualities for a long term of years, they are to be read in a man's face, for the warning or encouragement of his fellows ; on the other hand nature, careful of the tiger as of the lamb, helps him when the impression produced is bad to counteract their effect. Mr. Robert Stratton had, when he chose to use it, a melodious voice, which coming from one of his stature, seemed itself an affability, and which with those who had not the ill-fortune to know him, often disarmed suspicion. Indeed, in one case at least, where, if anywhere, one would have thought he was well known—that of his wife—it altogether redeemed him. The soft nothings which he had indulged in before marriage were still whispered into the same ears, and believed by them, as then, to have a genuine significance. This gentleness of speech, however, which when employed in her case was merely a safeguard, became to others a weapon

of offence more terrible than the loudest tongue, and he made use of it habitually, even in anger. He is standing with his back to the fire—for the fire, like the vestal flame, burns perpetually in the old Indian's room—but not as would have been the case elsewhere, with his coat-tails under his arms; it would have been an attitude too easy, and savouring of disrespect in the presence of one so exalted as the ex-Commissioner. Mr. Robert never forgot the subject in the son.

"He is sure not to disappoint us, I suppose," the old man was saying, with the frown that had ploughed those parallel lines on his wrinkled brow.

"I should hope, indeed, sir, he would not venture upon such a proceeding. It is true Sir Charles is said to be the creature of caprice, but he would surely think twice—and thrice—before treating a man of your position with such disrespect. Moreover, he expressed to me at the flower-show the very great pleasure with which he looked forward to making your acquaintance; 'A man,' he said, 'of unique attainments and quite exceptional administrative capacity. I never leave my hermitage,' he added 'as you

know, to mingle in ordinary society, but your father is no ordinary man.'"

All this was delivered in a mellifluous tone, but so distinct that not a word was lost, though it was clear from the other's putting a hollowed hand up to his ear that his hearing had somewhat failed him. At every complimentary observation the small cap nodded courteous approval, and the hubble-bubble seemed to breathe satisfaction.

"It is something," the old gentlemen replied, "to find one's efforts in a distant land, and on behalf of another race, appreciated by such a student of mankind as Sir Charles Walden. You think, however, there may have been another attraction for him at Hillsland."

"A secondary one, yes; Ruth certainly seemed to take his fancy."

"It is no wonder; her mother was very handsome; and she has also a resemblance to poor Cyril."

There was a silence for once, the hubble-bubble ceased, the amber mouthpiece of the nargileh had dropped unnoticed from the smoker's lips. Robert Stratton's hand went up

to the smooth shaven face to hide the sneer which every reference to his dead brother always evoked; he was jealous of him though he had been so long in his grave; jealous of the place he still held in his father's memory; jealous of the orphan daughter whose beauty, gentleness, and courage endeared her to all in that many-peopled house save him.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE DINNER PARTY WAS ARRANGED.

"WHO was with you at the flower-show beside Ruth?" inquired the ex-Commissioner, after a long pause.

"Jane."

"Umph!" The monosyllable was somehow not complimentary to Jane. The tone in which it was uttered seemed to imply that if there was another attraction at Hillsland Hall beside its proprietor and his granddaughter it was not likely to be Jane. She was, nevertheless, an important personage there; next to her father and her brother Robert, the most important, and one who, since she managed and supervised the whole household, it was even more expedient to be on good terms with, if possible; but this was not easy to accomplish.

The other daughters of the house, Mrs.

Merridew and Mrs. Lock, were both widows; but they had at one time of course possessed husbands, which had not happened to their elder sister, and that circumstance, some said, had soured her. But this explanation was only given by charitable persons, who had had no experience of Jane before she became of a marriageable age. She had been always sour; a crab-apple to begin with, of which no amount of skill and culture could have made a sweet apple. There was nothing about her like an apple; she was more like a pear—a prickly one—which, let it hang as long as it will, never grows mellow. She had been hanging for nearly forty years, and only grew harder and harder.

"It would have been better to let Mrs. Merridew chaperon Ruth," continued the old man, with irritation; "the child is never like herself—that is, at her best—with Jane. She should have been accompanied by someone for whom she has a liking."

"Lawrence was with her."

"I thought you said there was no one but you there," exclaimed the old man angrily. "Why do you attempt to deceive me?"

"I should not be so foolish as to do that, sir, even if I were wicked enough," returned the other, smiling. "When I said nobody, save us three, were present on the occasion to which you refer, I had forgotten Lawrence, who, in fact, *is* nobody."

"He is my grandson."

"But unworthy, as you yourself have said, sir," replied the other hastily, "to be remembered as such."

"Remembered? Why do you say *remembered?*" In his indignation the old gentleman turned his slippered feet off the sofa (as if they, too, had offended him), and sat up. "You are thinking of my will."

This was a subject, it was true, that was very often in Mr. Robert Stratton's thoughts; but at that moment nothing was further from them; a more groundless accusation was never made.

"You shock me, sir; you positively shock me," he replied with emotion. If I used an inappropriate term you should remember that it is not every one who has the gift of expressing themselves in the fittest words as you have. I

am surely not to blame, considering the undutiful and thankless manner in which the boy has behaved to you, for forgetting your relationship; whenever I see him, I say to myself (thinking of your goodness and the return it has met with) can that be your grandson?"

"I don't wonder at it, when you let him go about in clothes that would disgrace a scavenger? My grandson! Why, he looks more like my cow-boy."

"But nobody ever sees him," objected Mr. Robert gently.

"*I* see him—or, at least, I saw him three or four days ago—from this very window."

This argument was unanswerable. It would have been very true, but very injudicious, to have observed that Mr. Stratton had seen his grandson a good many times in very indifferent apparel, without the circumstance attracting his attention. As he ignored his existence, it was only reasonable to conclude that he ignored his clothes; but opposition was a thing that the ex-Commissioner detested only less than any reference to his own demise. That unhappy word, "remembered" had filled him with indignation,

which curiously enough was taking the unexpected direction of a fashionable fit-out for Lawrence Merridew.

"Has he no other clothes than those disreputable rags in which he met my eye?" inquired the old gentleman, now almost foaming at the mouth.

"Certainly, sir, he has his Sunday suit, which I will take care he wears till others have been provided for him; I need not say that when he went to the flower-show he was suitably apparelled."

"I hope so, indeed. Why, suppose Sir Charles was to see him as I saw him!"

"That, sir," said Mr. Robert earnestly (it was the very moment in which the expected guest had arrived with Lawrence on the hill-top), "is to the last degree unlikely; but I will take steps to render it impossible."

"All the preparations for Sir Charles's reception have, I conclude, been made, Robert."

"You may rest assured of that, sir; I do not think, so far as his comforts are concerned, that he will find anything to make him regret his visit."

"The great point is, however, that he may be induced to repeat it. Whatever caprice he exhibits—and I am told he is full of caprices—must of course be indulged. His likes and dislikes should be very carefully attended to."

"I have made his character my study, sir, from the moment that your intelligence suggested to me the advantage of his alliance. His aversion to society, for example, has caused me to invite—that is, in your name, of course—no one to meet him to-night except Grueby."

"And why Grueby? I thought Sir Charles disliked parsons?"

"Well, you see, Grueby is not very much like a parson; indeed, he is rather, so to speak, on the other side, and he knows about sporting matters, in which Sir Charles takes some interest. They are also already acquainted."

"Do you think that an advantage—to Grueby?" inquired the old gentleman cunningly.

"Mr. Robert's huge frame shook with admiring laughter. "Capital, capital!" he spluttered. "How rare is the gift of humour! What sagacity, too—what knowledge of human life!" Then, with an effort after seriousness,

"Grueby, of course, does not recommend himself to you, sir, but there are natures—and high ones, too—that love to stoop. I think Sir Charles takes pleasure in the man."

"Well, well," returned the other, much mollified, "so long as you don't put me next to him. By-the-bye, how have you arranged that matter? I mean the dinner-table. Sir Charles will be on my right hand, of course."

"Most certainly—when the ladies have withdrawn."

At that pause there was a struggle in the hubble-bubble as though it were choking.

"I have the list here," continued Robert, pulling a paper from his pocket, and fixing his eyes on it with great earnestness, to avoid the glare of indignation with which he was well aware he was being regarded. "Our guest, of course, must have a lady on either side of him, He will take my wife in to dinner."

"I thought she was indisposed—too delicate and that sort of thing for dinner parties," growled the old gentleman.

"That is so; but on an occasion of this kind, in which, as she has been told, you feel a par-

ticular interest, she will not shrink from a little exertion. It was her own proposal."

"I don't believe a word of it," cried the ex-Commissioner. "Man proposes and disposes too in your case. It was her husband who put it into her head, I'll warrant."

"It was indeed I who mentioned to her the possible importance of the entertainment," observed Mr. Robert softly; "but she herself at once expressed her willingness to further its intention. "'I am not so ill,' she said, 'but that I can do something.'"

"Humph! it won't be much, then; parties are not in her way. She's an invalid."

If the ex-Commissioner had said, "She is sure to get drunk," his tone could not have expressed greater dissatisfaction. "Now, Mrs. Merridew has been used to society—the very best."

"Let us hope so, since she paid such a price for it," answered the other drily. "My wife, however, has not been unaccustomed to see quite as eminent persons as Sir Charles Walden at her father's table. If he did not represent his borough in Parliament himself, he returned the man that did."

"Shoddy, my dear Robert, shoddy; there is something in social position that no money can buy. You may have lakhs and lakhs of rupees, but if you are uncovenanted, where are you? I have not, however, a word to say against Mrs. Robert, if you can keep her off her symptoms and her remedies; but I will not have her emptying her medicine chest over any guest of mine. Well, on the other side of Sir Charles you will put Ruth of course."

"Indeed, sir, I think that would be hardly judicious. She is very young, and has no right to any such position."

"What, my granddaughter, and the daughter of my eldest son, no right? Then I should like to see the girl who *had* rights."

"I was merely referring to her tender years, sir. It is not usual—at least in *this* country, where infant marriages are discouraged—to place the guest of the evening next a young, unmarried girl. It would also have an undesirable significance. Mrs. Merridew is, as you were observing, in every way qualified to be Sir Charles's left-hand neighbour."

"Well, well, arrange it as you please. We

shall be but a small party, and all pretty close together. With Jane I make eight of us at present. Is that right?"

"Quite right, sir. One less than the Muses is, I believe, the orthodox prescription for a dinner party. With Aunt Jerry we should be one too many, and for other reasons she had better be out of it."

"Aunt Jerry is certainly not much like a Muse," admitted the ex-Commissioner.

"Unless it is the Muse of Ancient History," smiled Mr. Robert; "she seems to remember nothing that did not happen thirty years ago."

"Things were better worth remembering then than they are now," observed the other sententiously. Mr. Robert looked up in surprise; it was rarely indeed that his father ever gave way to sentiment. "I can recall Aunt Jerry, as you call her," he went on, with a look that seemed to search the past, "as pretty as Ruth. Lock, too, was a handsome young fellow, and when he married her was counted one of the richest men in the county."

"He might have kept his money, too," observed Robert, with a keen glance of significance

at his father, "but for his thinking that 'Tom Tiddler's ground' was underground instead of above it."

"There are mines and mines," observed the old gentleman coolly, "and even in lead mines there are chances of recovery. The Common Wheal, for example, was said to be exhausted in Lock's time, and now it bids fair to head the market. He was an unfortunate fellow in everything except his marriage, was Lock."

"And that was very unfortunate for *us*," remarked Mr. Robert acidly. "I can imagine a man who has little to lose of his own taking great risks, but for a man of means to run the chance of beggary in the hopes of getting a little richer is in my opinion the act of a madman."

"That sounds very well, and would look very nice in a copy-book, Robert; it is a pity you have no children to profit by your moral reflections. By-the-bye, there is the boy Lawrence; what is to be done with him to-night?"

"He will dine with Aunt Jerry in her own apartments, and so be kept out of the way."

CHAPTER V.

LAWRENCE AND HIS RELATIVES.

"YONDER is the carriage, with my rascal Thornton behind it," exclaimed Sir Charles, as Lawrence and he looked down on the Hall from the hill-top. "Your people will be wondering why I have not already made my appearance, so with your good leave and many thanks for your guidance we will part company for the present. It is just as well, perhaps, that you and I should not be known as friends."

It was an act of consideration—and something more—that his companion thoroughly appreciated, for thereby Sir Charles not only showed that he understood his young friend's position in the household, but declared himself his ally. Where he was mistaken, as Lawrence bitterly reflected, was in his expectation that they should soon meet again, as for instance at

the dinner table. He knew, as well as though he had been present at the interview then going on between his grandfather and his Uncle Robert, that he would not be one of the guests. Though twenty years of age, and much better fitted for companionship than anyone within ten miles of Hillsland, Lawrence generally dined early, like a child, and had supper by himself, or sometimes a "meat tea" with Aunt Jerry; this was not for economy or convenience, but simply an arrangement of Uncle Robert's designed for the humiliation of the boy; it failed in its intent, for Lawrence much preferred to take his evening meal, as he would have preferred to take every other, apart from his enemy, and he had so much else and worse to resent in his kinsman's conduct towards him that this slight seemed but a flea-bite.

How a hatred between two human beings first begins (on one side) it is sometimes difficult to discover; there are such layers and layers of it as time goes on that what cast the original shade—though it was at the time distinct enough—has become undistinguishable. We talk of death ending such dislikes, and it may be

so in the case of the one who is first to go, for "in the grave," we are told, "there is no remembrance;" but it is not so in that of the other. In some cases, and subject to religious influence, he may forgive, or think that he forgives, but even if he would he cannot forget. It is not in human nature. There had probably never been a time when Robert Stratton had not disliked his nephew, Lawrence Merridew. His father had been a Guardsman, and Robert's social superior; for a few years he had been looked up to as a feather in the cap of the family. They had not grudged him the money he took out of it as his wife's dower, because they thought they would have received its equivalent in social consideration. But Colonel Merridew, who drove four-in-hand and was an authority at White's on most subjects, and whose movements were recorded in the "Fashionable Intelligence" as a matter of positive interest, was a very different person from that gallant officer after he had succumbed to an attack of chicken hazard (though it had lasted but ten hours), and not only lost his whole fortune (which indeed, thanks to previous inroads of the same complaint, would

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have been a small matter), but almost all that of his wife also.

When he died of a fever, some years afterwards, in by no means well-furnished lodgings, he left little behind him, save Lawrence, who—though a comfort to his mother—was hardly looked upon at Hillsland Hall as an acquisition. His being so comely, and for his age so bright and intelligent, did not count for much in his favour. Such gifts were, indeed, absolutely against him with his uncle—who had no share in them—and with sour Aunt Jane. If he had been a Stratton, they might have attracted his grandfather, as, indeed, though she was of the wrong sex, they did in Ruth's case; if his eldest son, though nothing to boast about, but rather the contrary—had left a son and heir, things might have been different with the ex-Commissioner in his old age.

Robert, who had never had his father's affection, though he had now (by no means without hard striving) his ear and trust, was childless, a circumstance which caused him the bitterest disappointment. Perhaps one of the reasons why he hated Lawrence was because, though only in the

female line, he was the sole male of his generation in the family. Jealousy of this kind is as common in ordinary households as in those of the blood royal.

Robert had stood between the lad and his grandfather's favour from the first, and had so contrived to keep him out of the old man's presence that, as we have seen, it took some extraordinary incident to remind him even of his existence; and with every wrong that he did the boy, he hated him more and more. Now that Lawrence had grown up, actual ill-usage had become dangerous, for though the uncle had thews and sinews far superior to those of his junior, the latter would by no means have submitted to it, but would have used any weapon that came handy; and moreover there would have been the public scandal. In later years, therefore, Uncle Robert, with the exception of such small personal humiliations as excluding him from the late dinner party, had confined himself to striking at Lawrence through his mother, a mode of attack which involved the minimum of danger while inflicting the maximum of pain.

Mrs. Merridew, though far from a wise woman, as her marriage had shown, had been at one time as engaging in manners as she was attractive in person. To say that there had been no one in the family who could vie with her in high spirits and conversation was no high compliment, for they were a dull lot; but she had been the light, not only of the Hall, but of the neighbourhood. Now all her gaiety had fled, or rather, what remained of it had done so—for her nature was elastic and could have borne anything but the dead weight of contempt and neglect that had been imposed on it—had died out, spark after spark. The one joy left her in life was her Lorry; and Lawrence, she was told, was worthless and a ne'er-do-well. Her sister, Miss Jane, had detected this fact even earlier than her brother Robert, and neither of them hesitated to communicate to her the discovery.

If he was so clever, they said, how was it that he had not distinguished himself at the school to which his grandfather had so generously sent him? It was not an expensive school, but it was quite true that but for the ex-Com-

missioner's aid, Mrs. Merridew would have found a difficulty in giving the lad an education at all. Why had he not got a scholarship and gone to college, and maintained himself like other clever boys, instead of being a burthen on his mother? She did not feel him to be a burthen, far from it, but the epithet stung her to the quick, as it was meant to do. She had no choice but to leave the lad and his future in their cruel hands. It had finally been decided that in a few months Lawrence was to go out to Singapore, where his grandfather's influence had obtained for him a clerkship in some commercial firm. It was an employment far from suitable to him, but "beggars must not be choosers," as Miss Jane had put it with her usual frankness.

In that great house there were several persons who pitied his lot, and the misery which his exile would entail upon his mother, but they were powerless to avert it. All the servants adored Master Lorry, who had a smile and a kind word for everybody; and they liked him none the less because they knew he was no favourite with Uncle Robert and Aunt Jane. Perhaps his most powerful ally was Mrs. Robert, who

had actually expressed an opinion that the lad was harshly treated; but her husband had only smiled and patted her cheek, and said that she was too gentle and kind for this world, and did not know what was for good for those cast in a rougher mould; as for fretting about the young fellow going so far away, as she seemed almost inclined to do (for she was easily moved to tears), he was obliged to remind her that the doctors had all warned her against fretting. The recollection of this circumstance and the conviction of her husband's solicitude about her, had reduced her sympathies for her sister-in-law and her child within very reasonable limits. She was an invalid, as the master of the house had termed her, of a very inoffensive but pronounced kind. The state of her own constitution was the paramount consideration with her, and though she was only "delicate," and seldom actually ill, she would perhaps have hardly welcomed a state of rude health, even had it been within her reach. She was accustomed to a hot-house existence, and preferred the care and petting it procured her, to being let alone and the open air.

Aunt Jerry, too, had a tenderness for Lawrence, which was, however, of little use to him, and was set down by her more able-minded relatives as a proof of her imbecility.

If he could be said to have a champion it was Ruth, though she had learnt by experience to conceal, for his own sake, the affection with which she regarded him. When they were children together she had often flamed up in generous indigation at the harshness with which the boy was treated. Only a year or two ago, indeed, she had spoken some very bitter words to her uncle on the subject, which had done the object of her compassion far more harm than good; but she had now schooled herself to hold her tongue about him, though at times she was near biting it through in keeping that enforced silence.

The knowledge of the girl's sympathy, though he knew but the tenth part of it, was very welcome to the young fellow; and his mother's love, though she never dared to reveal it save when they were alone, compensated him for much; but what made life at the Hall less intolerable to him, and the thoughts of his

approaching exile more hateful than aught else, was the neighbourhood of Kate Salesby. Only one person, save herself, was cognisant of this fact—and it was not Mrs. Merridew. That the lad should think of falling in love was too monstrous a piece of impertinence to be suspected by the higher powers at the Hall: if he was not well content with having a roof over his head, and a "meat tea" every day, and clothing after a fashion (though a good deal after *the* fashion), he must have been an ingrate indeed; the only object of his ambition ought by rights to be to relieve his grandfather of the expense he was putting him to, and to earn his own living as soon as possible, no matter in how remote a portion of the globe. That he had objects of interest of his own, in literature and the like, was unknown to them, and would not have been understood if it had been known. At the best it would only have excited some scornful merriment. Neither his uncle nor his aunt would have murdered Lorry in cold blood, but a very little extra provocation would have probably inclined them to do so, if the crime could have been committed with perfect impunity; a con-

dition of affairs that exists in disunited families much oftener than is supposed. Superficial Christianity, the glaze of civilisation, and above all the fear of punishment, keep hate and cruelty among us within certain bounds, but the savage is indigenous here as in Terra del Fuego.

It has been cynically observed that the worm will not turn if you tread upon him hard enough, but this depends upon the nature of the worm; in some of that species there is a great deal of vitality. No one in possession of the facts could accuse Uncle Robert and Aunt Jane of too much tenderness in this respect; they had not treated their worm, as Izaak Walton did, "as if they loved him;" they had put their heels on him so hard, and with such persistency, that it was a wonder that there was even a wriggle left in him—but there *was* a wriggle. The cause of this, which they were far indeed from suspecting, was that much as their victim hated them, he despised them more. It was curious, but though subject to such a persistent persecution as might well have given their victim a conviction of their superiority, Lawrence Merridew knew himself to be a head and shoulders above both of them, and

was conscious of a sense of power, which though ludicrous enough under the circumstances, enabled him to suffer and still be strong. For one of his years he had what is termed "the literary gift" in a marked degree, and what sometimes, though not always, accompanies it, a confidence in himself, which though often confounded with conceit, and indeed is *called* "confounded conceit," is something quite different from it. However contemptible, indeed, it may seem to others, to the possessor it is priceless. Sensitive as his organisation may be, and generally is, it enables him—while it lasts—to face the whips and scorns of the world in quite a surprising manner, as though it were some patent invention for hardening it, and makes his satin skin almost pachydermatous.

The worst disadvantage at which Lawrence Merridew was placed was that hitherto he had no one to sympathise with his literary aspirations; the two who loved him were unable to do so, and perceiving this he had shrunk from seeking sympathy. Help was coming to him in this matter, though as yet he knew it not, and in other matters also, though these too were beyond

his ken. He felt, indeed, that Sir Charles Walden was friendly inclined towards him; but he little guessed how favourable was the impression that his looks and manners, and especially the reckless frankness with which he had spoken of his own position, had made upon his new acquaintance.

CHAPTER VI.

INTRODUCTIONS.

Even to the eyes of its present visitor, well accustomed to the dwellings of the great, everything at Hillsland Hall was upon a large scale, and astonished him by its unnecessary magnitude. "It is like the Pyramids," was the baronet's mental reflection, "much too big for burying people in, even though as in this case they are alive." The mansion, indeed, was anything but homelike, and suggested a mausoleum, while its tenants struck him as being possessed of very little vitality. The Hall was enormous, and could have held half the county; and the drawing-room was of similar dimensions to that of a London club, but very differently furnished. Besides being crowded with every description of arm-chair and ottoman, it was full of Eastern knick-knacks, inlaid tables, screens of marvellous

delicacy, and boxes of exquisite workmanship, from which emanated odours that made you faint. There were temples of ivory, not much smaller than their originals, and ivory chessmen almost the size of real men. While Sir Charles was regarding these things with approving looks, he was saying to himself—

"It looks like a blessed bazaar in which everything is for sale, and for not one single article would I give sixpence, except for these chessmen."

His host, in evening apparel, but still with his black cap on, was explaining how he had won the men from the Rajah of Radenpoor at the game itself.

"And what did you stake on your side?"

"I think it was 10,000 rupees," returned the old gentleman loftily. "The Rajah was annoyed, of course, but, as he often played at chess with real men, on the squares of his audience chamber, and had plenty of them, I felt that I was not depriving him of his amusement."

Sir Charles regarded his host with the admiration due to a first-class liar. "It must have been a very interesting contest," he murmured.

"Life in India is interesting to those who deal with it on a large scale," returned the ex-Commissioner. "Things in England appear dwarfed by comparison."

Here Miss Jane entered the room, who was certainly not one of the things. She was almost as tall, though much more spare than her brother Robert; she had a habit of sniffing disapproval at everything, and was unable to refrain from doing so now at Sir Charles, but he fortunately set it down to the sandal wood and other scents with which the atmosphere was laden. He had already been introduced to her, but not, of course, in her evening costume, which accentuated what was amiss with her, as it always does with scraggy women. She looked like a lay figure such as artists use, very angular and awkward; but her face, notwithstanding her thin lips, and eyes of pale blue, had plenty of unpleasant expression in it.

"Your father has been showing me his beautiful chessmen," said Sir Charles; "they fill me with envy."

"I suppose they are very fine," she replied; "considering what they cost they ought to be."

The situation was a little embarrassing, till the ex-Commissioner had explained in a low tone and with a significant smile that the true history of the transaction had been unrevealed to his offspring, lest they should imagine their parent had had gambling proclivities.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "though it was not worth while to trouble you with it, the whole affair had a diplomatic origin. In dealing with native princes—— But here is Ruth; you remember meeting my granddaughter at the bazaar the other day."

"Having once seen Miss Ruth Stratton it is not likely that one should forget her," said Sir Charles, with a grave bow; the compliment was robbed of its artificiality by the earnest and respectful tone in which it was pronounced; and indeed it was a statement that did not admit of cavil. It was difficult to imagine a more beautiful creature than the young girl, whose hand he just touched with his own as though it had been something sacred. Young as she was, she was both tall and shapely; her eyes like the dark blue violet; her hair of that blue-black tinge that is almost always coarse, but which in her case

was finer than silk; her complexion dark yet delicate; her movements graceful as the fawn; but the chief charm of her lay in the expression of her thoughtful face. This was not by any means of that emotional kind, of which we say, "it is the index of the soul;" it might perhaps have been so at one time; but few as were her years she had had no little experience of life, and she did not wear her heart upon her sleeve, because it may be she had some knowledge of daws and their habits; if she had been a man, one would have said she had a searching look.

Sir Charles's compliment did not embarrass her in the least; she smiled sweetly indeed, for she could not smile otherwise, but it was a smile of the merest acknowledgment: it was a pretty speech enough, she seemed to be thinking to herself, but absolutely of no value. The speaker, it was clear, had not advanced himself in her regard by uttering it by a hair's-breadth.

On every other member of the household he had marked the impression produced by his own greatness; even the Lord High Commissioner (as he had already termed him in his own mind) had been careful to let him see that he felt the

honour of his visit. Mr. Robert's manner of receiving him had been fulsome; Miss Jane had shown her teeth, in a way altogether unusual with her, in effusive welcome; but Ruth treated him exactly like every other gentleman whom she had seen but once, save for the slight *soupçon* of familiarity that was due to a guest. She talked of the bazaar at which they had met, of its people and its prices, with a certain insistence of reminiscence, as though to remind him that that was the only common ground between them; she was exceedingly at her ease in the Zion of his position. Many men in his place would have credited her with an affectation of simplicity; but this man set her manner down to its true cause at once. Her mind was too full of really serious matters—only too probably, unpleasant ones—to take much heed of him, or of what he said.

This was not complimentary, of course, but there were plenty of compliments for him elsewhere. Mr. Robert presently entered the room with his wife leaning on his arm, and a little "got up" speech of how for this occasion only she had thrown off her invalid habits to bid him welcome to Hillsland Hall. She was a washed-

out little woman, with that sort of die-away air that is promising to nobody but a lady's doctor. Sir Charles, who had a talent for "ticketing" people—assigning them to the genus to which they belonged—perceived in her at once the professional invalid. "In the daytime," he reflected, "that woman will have a red nose." And his diagnosis was correct. Mrs. Robert was really in delicate health, but—like many women who have other means of subsistence—she traded upon it. Poor people never do this, because they know they will find no customers, but a sick heiress is always interesting to a certain class of her fellow-creatures. Mrs. Robert, however, was far from interesting to her present guest, though to look at him you would have thought him sympathetic to his finger-tips. Perhaps he took a cynical pleasure in answering the Artificial according to their artificiality, or perhaps it seemed to him the easiest mode of treating their disorder, but certainly his host had entertained a needless apprehension when he had expressed his fear that his daughter-in-law might bore Sir Charles with her complaints. In five minutes she and the guest of the evening were discussing reme-

dies for neuralgia with an earnestness little short of enthusiasm.

This conduct on Sir Charles's part was very pleasing to Mr. Robert (though he had his doubts of its genuineness), inasmuch as it corroborated the view he had taken of his wife's social attractions. What especially gratified him was that the baronet's manner on being introduced to Mrs. Merridew, though perfectly courteous, had certainly less warmth in it, as though to mark his sense of Mrs. Robert being mistress of the house. This was even a greater victory than Robert imagined, for not only was the widow his wife's superior in appearance and address, but her sad sweet face was beaming with a gentle gratitude to the baronet for the interest which, as she had heard a few hours ago, he had manifested in her son. He recognised it at once, but without the least acknowledgment for it in tone or feature, and the gracious coldness with which he received her extinguished in a moment the little glimmer of hope she had entertained of her poor Lorry having found a friend.

It was from his mother that the lad had inherited his good looks, though not his intelli-

gence, nor even that air of high breeding which clung to him in spite of his patched clothes; she was still a very handsome woman, but "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" that did not, as it often does, enhance her comeliness. It was no intellectual struggle, but the hopeless contest with circumstance that had ploughed those lines of care upon her kindly face. She had been "forgiven" by her family for the unfortunate marriage which they had done their best to promote, but only to find herself in a state of slavery. Her father was indifferent to her; her brother and sister Jane were her tyrants; and her boy was friendless and penniless. It was amazing how she could smile at all, but on an occasion of this kind, as she only too well understood, she was bound to smile. Lawrence had told her, with the exaggeration of youth, of their visitor's goodwill towards him; how his frankness had led him to confide to him his miserable circumstances. And she had looked for some sign, even perhaps for a clasp of the hand, from this rich and powerful man to assure her of the interest he felt in Lorry. It was, of course, an absurd expectation; but when they

have no ground for hope the wretched often entertain hopes without ground. It seemed possible to her, that being himself placed so far above fear or favour, Sir Charles might have shown himself friendly to her. But no sign was shown.

He exhibited rather more than less of courtesy in his reception of the Rev. Arthur Grueby, who made up their company, than in her own case. The Vicar of Hillsland, it was true, was known to him, but such knowledge could hardly have been a passport to his favour; a civil recognition was the most he could have been led to expect, whereas Sir Charles's manner was distinctly gracious. The man was a clergyman indeed, but far from a credit to his cloth. On one occasion the parish had been deprived of his spiritual services for the space of three years, the living during that period, as Sir Charles himself was said to have remarked, being "not only sequestered but sequestrated." He knew all about Mr. Grueby, and, to say truth, was by no means flattered at finding him his fellow-guest. Something of this, as we know, his host had foreseen, though from his long absence abroad,

he knew much less of Mr. Grueby than his neighbours; but Mr. Robert had a large charity for sinners who were of use to him, and he had found the vicar useful in many ways; they had tastes in common, one of which was a passion for the race-course, and were pronounced by the parish with more truth than elegance to be as "thick as thieves."

It was possible that Mr. Grueby had "made a point" with his friend of being asked to meet the baronet on the present occasion; and if so, there were reasons why he should have been gratified. It was probable, too, that Mr. Robert conceived Sir Charles to be in too high a position to care what guests—since they must all be his inferiors—were asked to meet him; or even that since he had got into scrapes himself he might have a fellow-feeling for another in the like position, but in that case he had made a great mistake. The *bon vivant* who after too splendid a repast takes more château margaux than is good for him has very little in common with the wretch who gorges himself with tripe and washes it down with too much gin punch. Sir Charles, as we know, had much better reasons for feeling

unfavourably disposed towards Mr. Robert Stratton, but it is doubtful whether any of these was so strong and vigorous as that which seized him when he found that he had been asked to Hillsland Hall to meet the Rev. Arthur Grueby.

CHAPTER VII.

AT THE DINNER TABLE.

The dining-room at Hillsland Hall was on the same gigantic scale as the drawing-room, with which it communicated—or rather was cut off from—by two pairs of folding-doors. It was plainly furnished, but boasted of a horse-shoe table, such as is now seldom seen out of a college combination-room. Art in these days has opposed itself to it, but there is nothing to be compared with it for comfort and even for appearance, especially in winter-time. Whatever the season, a fire was always burning in the grate when the host was present, and a pleasant light, through the glass screen in front of it, it cast upon the glass and silver. For the business of dinner the "horse-shoe" has no rival; the genial flame, deprived of its scorching powers by

the crystal barrier, is the only *vis-à-vis*, and your "duty" is absolutely restricted to your neighbour on either side of you.

Sir Charles, between Mrs. Robert and Mrs. Merridew, especially congratulated himself on being opposite to nobody, and free to converse as he pleased without observation from over the way. If Ruth, indeed, had been there instead of the screen, the arrangement would have been still more satisfactory; but he much preferred the fire to any other face that could have been substituted for it, and especially to the monkey features and shifty smile of Mr. Arthur Grueby. "No one can help his looks" is a well-known saying, but contains only a half truth; one of the best men I have ever known was also the ugliest, but his expression not only redeemed him (if you had the sense to read it), but put him almost on a level with the angels. The Vicar of Hillsland could not change his hue, which was tropical, nor add a cubit to his stature, which was but little over five feet, but that look of shiftiness in his eyes and mouth, alternating, on occasions of self-confidence, with a certain vulgar cunning, was something for which he was cer-

tainly indebted to second nature rather than her predecessor.

The baronet, who had taken Mrs. Robert into dinner, was for some time exceedingly attentive to her; he found himself, not without some amusement, discussing with her homœopathy and the massage system, with an occasional excursion into mesmerism. She narrated her symptoms with much frankness, and as a remedy for some imaginary disorders which, not to be behindhand with his fair but frail companion, he invented on the spur of the moment, she earnestly recommended him to try electricity. On his part, he gravely suggested mud baths, the consideration of which, in connection with the soil of the neighbourhood, took such strong possession of her mind, always in search of new remedial agents, that he felt he could leave her for the present to the contemplation of it. Then he addressed himself in a more cheerful but lower tone to his other neighbour.

"How is it that my young friend Lawrence is not with us to-night?"

Mrs. Merridew, as he had not failed to notice, had hardly touched bit or sup, and it was fortu-

nate perhaps that knife and fork were not in her hands when he addressed her, or they might have fallen from them, so moved was she by that simple question.

"He is not here; he is never here," she answered hurriedly, "he is not permitted to mingle with his——" she hesitated for a moment for a word, and then, with a little touch of scorn, altogether foreign to her character, added, "his betters."

"Indeed?" observed Sir Charles with an air of curiosity. "Is it as regards moral character, or personal appearance, or charm of manner, that he is considered the inferior of our friend the divine, yonder?"

"Do you mean the vicar?" asked the widow with simplicity.

"Well, the word, I must confess, did not describe him with accuracy; yes, I meant Grueby; he is a clergyman, you know."

"He is not very good friends with my poor Lawrence," said Mrs. Merridew, whose mind was wont to occupy itself with one subject at a time, and lost itself if led astray from it. "His position gives him opportunities——"

"Preaches against him from the pulpit, does he?" interrupted Sir Charles, laughing softly.

"Well, he did say something once, at Robert's instigation, about Lawrence's opinions; it seemed hard that one so young should be held up as it were to the disapproval of a whole congregration. Mr. Percy, of Binstead, thinks quite differently of Lorry."

"Well, well, Percy is a Christian and a gentleman, and we must make allowances for those who are neither," returned the baronet with charitable unction. "Perhaps you do not know, Mrs. Merridew, that your boy's father and I were in the same regiment together?"

"I knew it very well, Sir Charles, but since you didn't allude to it, it was not for me——" She stopped, then added in broken tones, "All those days are past and gone."

It was easy to see that they were. There had been a time, her neighbour remembered, when Colonel Merridew, of the Guards, was a personage in London, and the worn and weary, but still comely woman beside him, a toast. The colonel had soon come to the end of his tether, which, as has been said, had included his wife's

money as well as his own, but his downward career had been brilliant as that of a comet.

"There is something in your boy that reminds me of his father," said Sir Charles musingly, and purposely ignoring his companion's emotion; "he is frank and high-spirited, and even under very serious difficulties keeps his light heart."

"And then Lorry is so clever," murmured the widow earnestly, "he writes such beautiful poetry, and stories, and things." For the moment, in her maternal enthusiasm, she had forgotten she was a domestic nobody talking of a penniless boy.

"What is Mrs. Merridew so eloquent about, Sir Charles?" inquired Mrs. Robert in her thin invalid tone, with a squeeze of lemon in it. "One cannot get in a word edgeways."

The widow turned pale with terror; if Sir Charles should reveal the subject of their conversation, she was lost indeed.

"I am afraid it was my fault, Mrs. Robert," he replied, dropping his voice to a whisper, "I was so indiscreet as to venture on the topic of old times."

"And that, no doubt, unsealed the fountain

of reminiscence," she answered laughing, "poor Mrs. Merridew is a little weak on that subject, and those who know her are careful to avoid it."

"She has a son, has she not?" inquired Sir Charles indifferently.

"Oh, yes. It is wonderful she has not talked to you about him. He lives with us, you know, though he is soon going to Seringapatam —no, it is Singapore, by-the-bye—where his grandfather has obtained him a situation."

"Then he is almost grown up, I suppose—indeed, I now recollect having seen him at the bazaar the other day."

"It is very good of you to remember him. I really know nothing against him, but I am afraid—at least my husband tells me he has no great hopes of him."

"A *mauvais sujet?*"

"I should not like to say that; but he has thrown away his opportunities at school and so on."

"Perhaps the poor boy is stupid."

"No; he is not exactly that; he has even talents of a certain kind, I believe, but—if you are wondering that you do not see him here——"

"Not at all," interrupted Sir Charles, "I feel sure there must be some good reason."

"Well, Robert thinks—and he generally knows best, I find—that Lawrence—his name is Lawrence—is not quite—I dare hardly whisper it, lest Mrs. M——, poor thing, should hear me, and we know what a mother always thinks of her boy——"

Sir Charles nodded adhesion; his maternal instincts were at least as strong, he said to himself, as Mrs. Robert's.

"Well, Robert doesn't think the boy quite gentlemanlike."

"Dear, dear." Sir Charles clucked regret with his tongue, an operation which, combined with the thought of Robert Stratton being a judge of gentlemanliness, almost suffocated him. "That's bad; because his father was certainly one."

"So I have heard," said Mrs. Robert frigidly, "but he was also a gambler."

"Does Lawrence gamble?"

"Well, he has nothing to gamble with," returned the lady naïvely; "but Robert says he is reckless."

"I am sorry," said Sir Charles gravely. "I

should like to have seen him, for the sake of old times; but I don't want to be corrupted."

"Oh, he won't do that, I'm sure," she answered encouragingly. "The poor lad is nobody's enemy but his own. If you would really like to see something of him, I'll speak to Robert."

"Thanks. Not that it much matters—you are not going, I do hope."

"Yes, Robert has coughed; we have our little signals. His father wants to smoke. You will not forget the electric belt."

"No, no, nor you the mud baths. The subject is at all events worth inquiry. I should think Mr. Grueby would know about them—I mean as to the soil of the parish."

The two parted on the best of terms. Mrs. Robert, who had intended to go to bed after dinner utterly exhausted by her "effort" to entertain the guest of the evening, thought she might even see him again in the drawing-room. She *had* "entertained" him exceedingly.

She had also afforded him a character study of some interest. He had come to the conclusion —and it was a just one—that she was much

more weak than wicked. She had certainly exhibited a little jealousy of Mrs. Merridew, but that lady had a son, whereas she was childless: nor did her account of Lawrence seem the result of any personal malevolence; she had evidently no knowledge of the young fellow save what was imparted to her by her husband, of whom she had unwittingly given even a worse impression to her late neighbour than he had formed before. The time, however, had come, now the ladies had withdrawn, when it was necessary to show himself friendly to that gentleman, as well as to his host and fellow-guest. It was not a difficult operation, for Sir Charles Walden could be all things to all men, and would have been equally at home in the House of Convocation or in a thieves' kitchen; but it was a very disagreeable one, for notwithstanding his many-sidedness, he was one of the most fastidious of men. Moreover, if you had asked him why he was about to take any pains in such a matter, he would have been puzzled to answer the question. At his age he could hardly be termed "a creature of impulse," but his character remained as much a riddle to himself as to other people.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN THE LADIES HAD WITHDRAWN.

"I HOPE, Sir Charles, you have found your dinner to your liking," observed his host when the cloth had been removed and revealed the depths of the mahogany table, and the curved line of a little railway on which the decanters ran on silver wheels. "We rather pride ourselves on our curries."

"Curries, sir," exclaimed the baronet enthusiastically, "the banquet was worthy of a Beauvilliers. You pro-consuls of the present day, it seems, rival those of old Rome in the splendour of your entertainments."

The ex-Commissioner smiled like one conscious of merit, but who has no objection to its being recognised. Mr. Robert endeavoured to look like a Prince of the Blood, when the Queen's health is being drunk; though not immediately

concerned in the matter, it reflected credit upon him. Mr. Grueby, perceiving a compliment had been paid to his host, though the allusion to the pro-consul was beyond him, exclaimed "Hear, hear," and emptied his glass of madeira, as though he was doing honour to a toast, then added, in a loud aside to his fellow-guest, "For my part I can't think how he does it."

It was not a very judicious remark, since it seemed to imply a want of visible means in his entertainer of providing a good dinner, and it met with no outward sympathy from the person addressed, though his very heartstrings were tickled by it. The face of the host as he pulled stertorously at his narghile, which had already been supplied to him, and glared at the little divine, was a study; nor was Mr. Robert's countenance without the traces of annoyance. He could already hear his father's "What do you think of your vicar *now?*" a question which was sure to be put to him the next morning. It seemed probable there might be other reasons for the same inquiry; for Mr. Grueby, who had paid much attention to the champagne during the repast, now constituted himself a permanent

official on the bottle railway, taking good care the line should not be blocked, while at the same time he never failed to stop the train at his own station. The two golden rules for drinking—"Drink slow" and "Don't mix your liquors"—he recklessly ignored, and would probably have paid as little heed to the third, "Never sit with your back to the fire," had not the horse-shoe table made such an imprudence impossible.

Though the company was small in number, their characters were various. Sir Charles was a man apart, but at the same time capable of conversing on any topic, and with the air of one to whom it was familiar. The parson, naturally garrulous and egotistic, was rendered more so by the generous wines, which, as he observed with justice, and a movement of the eye designed to be intelligent, was "such a tipple as you didn't get every work-a-day, nor even Sundays." Mr. Robert, though chiefly occupied in restraining his friend's loquacity, had a mind full of serious (though far from religious) matters. The host, taciturn on all other subjects, was eloquent, between his puffs of tobacco, upon the affairs of British India, in which the baronet courteously

affected a keen interest. He did not talk of elephants and tigers, but discussed the more important, if less entertaining topics of the future of our Eastern possessions, not without a delicate suggestion now and then, that it would have given better promise if his own commissionership had been prolonged. What mortal man could effect for the benefit of toiling millions of our fellow-creatures and our fellow-subjects, though with dusky skins, in a quarter of a century, by forethought and assiduity (with, perhaps, some little natural genius for administration), he might say he had done; but, after all, he felt that his work was but a broken column. The ridiculous system of superannuation had cut short his usefulness. In the matter of irrigation, for instance, the irrigated area in his province had been increased.

Here Mr. Grueby illustrated the subject under discussion by upsetting a bottle of sherry, and irrigating the horse-shoe table with its contents.

"Ring the bell," roared the ex-Commissioner. If the servant had been a native and had answered with Eastern promptitude his master

would probably have ordered him to remove the vicar, for, as an administrator of justice on a large scale, his temper was exceedingly short; but there was, fortunately, some little delay which gave time for reflection, and an opportunity for apology on the part of the vicar. "Very sorry," he was heard to murmur, "points got wrong somehow on the railway."

"Fortunately," said Sir Charles, with his ready smile, "it was only a goods train, and there has been no loss of life."

The ex-Commissioner, save for muttered ejaculations of wrath which alternated with the hubble-bubble of his pipe, was, however, silenced for the evening; the great gun from which a good deal more might have been expected, and would, indeed, undoubtedly have come, was, so to speak, spiked, and the baronet felt some gratitude towards the divine in consequence. It now, however, became necessary to talk to the vicar, Mr. Robert being openly occupied, though his efforts were carried on in whispers, in assuaging his father's indignation. The position, which would have been embarrassing to most persons in his place,

afforded genuine pleasure to the guest of the evening. It seemed to him that he had not had such fun for many a day as he was enjoying at "the Warren," as he called it. Every inmate of the house had excited in him either interest or amusement, and though he had taken care to leave the date of his departure open (a precaution he never neglected), he felt in no hurry to return to the solitude of Hurlby.

"And what is your tip for the Derby?" he inquired of Mr. Grueby, with the air of a neophyte addressing the very fountain of information.

"Ah, that's tellings, Sir Charles," returned the other, not only with his usual wink of superhuman cunning, but even with a slight projection of his tongue. "We know what we know, don't we, Mr. Robert?"

"I know nothing at all about it," returned that gentleman curtly; just at that moment he was far from inclined to encourage or even acknowledge the familiarity that existed between himself and his clerical friend.

"Quite right, mum's the word," returned the other with a chuckle.

Mum *had* been the word, with Mr. Grueby, while dinner was going on, but port and madeira had also since played their parts with him, and placed him in a position tolerably elevated, from which he was not likely to be moved by satire or snubbing. Though by no means drunk, he had been rendered after a fashion genial, and wholly oblivious of social superiority. He would have called Sir Charles, Walden, only he had forgotten his name.

"Well," he said, "not to be unsociable, I will tell you what Salesby thinks of the first favourite, and you must admit he is a good judge. You won't go far wrong if you go by Salesby."

"Still, I have heard Mr. Salesby has been unfortunate in his racing speculations," observed the baronet, smiling.

"Well, that is so; I said you would not go far wrong in following his advice, but I did not say you would be right. He is the kind of man that always backs the second horse. He's wonderfully keen upon it still, poor devil; 'I should like to live to see my son ride the winner of the Derby,' he was only saying the other day."

"But I thought he had no son."

"Nor has he; that's the joke of it. Twenty years ago he might have said 'I hope to live to own a Derby winner:' but he has gone down several pegs since then."

"It is fortunate, poor fellow, then, that he is childless."

"Nay, but he isn't. That shows *you* have not been at Hillsland, Sir Charles, for a year or two, or you would have found out, I warrant, that Dick's daughter has grown to be the prettiest girl—well, save one who shall be nameless—in the whole parish. A brown girl, with very good eyes, and who knows how to use them; 'she's backit like a peacock, she's breastit like the swan;' you know the style; only Kitty has a tongue of her own that flicks you like a whip."

"Then that was Miss Kitty," reflected Sir Charles, "who was using her eyes with such effect on Master Lawrence in the orchard this afternoon. I admire his taste and also hers, for it's clear her tongue has flicked the parson."

"But you have suffered this young lady to run away with you, Mr. Grueby," he observed,

"which, indeed, is not to be wondered at from what you tell me of her charms, and have not answered my question about the Derby."

"Oh, Salesby thinks that those who have put their money on Ganymede will lose it."

"But you, it seems, have better and more private information on that matter."

"Well, perhaps we have," and the vicar looked with triumphant sagacity towards Mr. Robert; that gentleman's face, however, might have been carved in stone for any response it gave him. "I'm sorry to seem grumpy, but a secret—and especially a secret of the stable—is worth nothing when it's told."

"Do you suppose," inquired Mr. Robert in icy tones, "that the three to one in half-crowns you may have taken upon the event in question is likely to excite the cupidity of Sir Charles Walden?"

"Oh, come, I like that," returned the vicar, stung by his friend's contemptuous tone; "half-crowns, indeed. And now you've mentioned the odds he has only got to look at the paper and you've told him."

"I give you my honour, Mr. Grueby," ob-

served Sir Charles, with great gravity, "that I will take no advantage of the indiscretion."

"Enough said between gentlemen," returned the vicar effusively. "A glass of wine with you, Sir Charles."

This operation was effected with great solemnity, while the ex-Commissioner in speechless indignation pushed his velvet cap up so far on the back of his head that it seemed to hang there by mere capillary attraction, and Mr. Robert stabbed a pear with his silver knife with murderous vehemence.

"And how are the mines going on up Hillsland way?" inquired Sir Charles, breaking an embarrassing silence; "in my part of the world they seem to be showing signs of recovery."

For the first time the continuity of the speaker's usual success was broken; he had, hitherto, said nothing which was not acceptable, and as his wont (when it pleased him to be gracious) in his most gracious manner, but to speak of mines at Hillsland Hall was like talking of a rope in the house of a man whose son has been hanged. In this case, it was only a son-in-law, but the shaft, as it might well be

called, went home. Aunt Jerry's husband—Mr. Jeremiah Lock—had sunk in shafts about one hundred thousand pounds. The baronet's question had been addressed to the host, and Mr. Robert, no doubt to save his father from an unpleasant topic, had opened his mouth to reply to it; for some reason, however, best known to himself, he shut it, without permitting one word to escape, and with his eyes fixed on his plate waited for the old gentleman's rejoinder.

"I know—er—very little—er—about mines," he answered, while the hubble-bubble of the narghile made itself very distinctly heard, a sign, as one of the party at least knew, of suppressed emotion; "but, from what I hear—er—there is more activity in that branch of speculation."

"Activity is just the word for them," replied the baronet smiling; "they always remind me of volcanoes, not only from the devastation they cause, but from their periods of eruption and quiescence. They make such a sensation when they are prospering, and are so very quiet when the lode gives out. There is nothing in nature looks so dead as a worked-out mine."

"When they *are* dead, however, they still make 'calls,'" observed the vicar ruefully. It was clear that Mr. Grueby had dropped his half-crowns in other places besides the race-course.

"There are exceptions, however," remarked Sir Charles with cheerfulness. "I hear the Common Wheal mine, for example, which we all thought dead, has come to life again, and the old shareholders are getting cent. per cent. for what they thought was lost money."

"I read something to that effect in the paper the other day," returned Mr. Robert indifferently. "If you have finished your cigar, Sir Charles, we will join the ladies." The host himself did not join them, but pleading fatigue and the privilege of old age, retired to his sanctum, muttering execrations on the vicar in the Hindustani tongue, and followed by his body servant with the narghile.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

When the gentlemen entered the drawing-room, they found the ladies at nearly as great a distance from one another as cattle who are not on good terms upon a common. Mrs. Robert almost prostrate on a sofa, recruiting her exhausted energies; Miss Jane superhumanly upright on a music stool in front of the piano; Mrs. Merridew at a tambour frame, at which she was gazing thoughtfully but doing not one stroke of work; and Ruth with a book in her hand, occupying one-half of a conversation chair. At the gentlemen's appearance the whole party became endowed with vitality, as though it were some automatic instrument, in which, when you put a penny in the slot, the instrument begins to work. Mrs. Robert sat up and feebly smiled; Miss Jane struck a few notes on the piano; Mrs.

Merridew began to make moss roses with floss silk; and Ruth rose from her chair.

"Pray do not let me disturb you," said Sir Charles to her; "what a charming chair! Should I drive you away, if I were to try it?"

The girl hesitated for a moment, and then resumed her seat.

"No, indeed," she answered gently, but with a touch of coldness, "why should you?"

"Well, the fact is we have all been misbehaving ourselves," he replied smiling, "smoking cigars. I feel as if I ought to change my coat before coming near a lady."

"We are all used to the smell of smoke in this house."

For so young a girl, she struck him as marvellously unembarrassed; there was not a trace of shyness about her, but still less of forwardness or flirtation. When he had entered the room, he thought she had had some purpose in having chosen the conversation chair.

"Vainly," he had said to himself, "is the snare spread in sight of the bird." This was not from vanity, though he had a pretty high opinion of himself, but the result of experience.

So many nets had been spread for him in his time by the female fowler; but now he felt he had been mistaken. The chair, if there was any design in its choice, had, he was convinced, been chosen for her. Her manner, if not absolutely hostile to him, was not encouraging; it was cold and indifferent; and she was surely too young to affect indifference with the object of attracting him. Nevertheless it had that effect. It piqued him. She had undeniable attractions of her own too, of which the conversation chair gave him excellent opportunities of judging.

A more beautiful girl, he was compelled to acknowledge, as they sat at ease opposite to one another, not too close to be embarrassing yet near enough for minute observation, he had never seen. Without the least touch of haughtiness, she wore an air of singular independence and self-reliance; it was evident that he had by no means made that impression on her which he was accustomed to make on women far her seniors. She was comparatively alone with him; Mr. Robert was apparently saying something sympathising to his invalid spouse; Mr. Grueby was turning over the leaves of Miss Jane's music

book, and beating time, as well he might, for it was all wrong and deserved it, with unsteady hands; and Mrs. Merridew was busy with her moss roses. The pair in the conversation chair were isolated, but Ruth sat perfectly at her ease, with her finger keeping the place in her book, as though she were at least as ready to resume her reading as for conversation.

"May I ask what is the subject of your studies?" Sir Charles inquired.

"I was reading Shelley's 'Revolt of Islam.'"

"A beautiful poem," he observed, "but rather unintelligible. Do you not find it so?"

"Now and then I require it to be explained to me."

"You are fortunate in finding an expounder."

For the first time the colour came into her face, enhancing what had seemed perfection.

"Yes; I am afraid I am not very poetical. Shelley puzzles me, where, I am told, he ought not to do so. For instance, there is his 'Cloud.' I feel how beautiful it is, but the meaning is in places obscure to me."

"I have found that too, and hitherto it has vexed me; now I shall be pleased because I shall know I have your sympathy."

"I should think it would be more satisfactory," she replied coldly, "to get the poem explained."

He felt that she resented his compliment, and, indeed, some men might have considered themselves snubbed, but to Sir Charles Walden such a conviction was impossible; he drew from his pocket a gold pencil case and a dainty little ivory tablet.

"Then you will not refuse," he said, "to kindly oblige me with the name and address of your instructor."

She could not but smile at his pretence of earnestness, but again a flush mantled to her forehead, "It is my cousin Lawrence," she said, "who smooths my Shelley difficulties; he is very fond of poetry."

"Indeed!" the other answered with a pleasant smile. "I dare say now he writes poetry himself?"

"He does, and very well," she answered gravely; then added hastily, "not that I am

any judge of such matters, and besides, I have no right to say a word about it."

"I wonder whether she has or not?" thought Sir Charles to himself. "It is almost certain that these two young people have fallen in love with one another. What else have they to do in this house, with such surroundings? Upon my life, Master Lorry, you are not so much to be pitied after all."

"You need not be afraid of my telling tales out of school, my dear young lady," he replied in the gentlest tone, "for your cousin is a friend of mine."

It was the one advantage which his superiority in years gave him that he could use that phrase, "my dear young lady," without impertinence; but it was not altogether to his satisfaction that she seemed to take it as a matter of course; what was quite as probable, she might not, however, have noticed it, her mind being occupied with another subject—and *that* was not a consoling reflection to him either.

"Yes," she said, with the first approach she had shown to animation, "Lawrence told me that you had been kind to him."

"I have every desire to be so," returned Sir Charles softly, "but I have had no opportunity of showing him kindness. I could not help being pleased with such an engaging young fellow; who could?"

"A good many people can," she answered bitterly. "Even if you were but civil to him, it was a new experience; civility is a thing he is not accustomed to." The speaker's eyes glittered, but not with tears; she clenched her fingers, and pressed her lips together, as if to suppress an outburst of indignation.

"And yet your cousin seems to me so bright and genial and willing to please," observed Sir Charles, with a surprised air. "Of course good looks go some way with one, even with one's own sex, but his manner is as pleasant as his face."

He had no fault to find with her immobility now; the girl's cheeks were flushed with pleasure, her mouth wore a grateful smile; her very bosom heaved with sympathetic emotion.

"You agree with me, I see," he continued, "which shows I have judged him aright. Now what makes people—I mean the people you speak of—treat him——"

"Like a dog," she put in suddenly; "that is how they treat him. He has his faults, of course, poor fellow; who has not? But if you ask me why they treat him so I cannot tell."

"The explanation is easy enough, my dear young lady," he answered gently. "They feel that he is superior to them in natural endowments—spiritual, mental, and physical—and having the whiphand of him in material, though less important, matters, they like to make him feel his inferiority there. It is not generally understood, but it is nevertheless true, that a considerable section of mankind—and, alas! even of womankind—except that they have the attribute of envy, in which the quadruped is deficient——. But in a young lady's presence I must not express myself too strongly——"

"You are not doing that," she answered with suppressed agitation; "you do not know what he has to endure."

Sir Charles smiled to himself at this introduction of the personal pronoun into an abstract question.

"Well, I was about to say, as regards those who tyrannise over helpless and inoffensive per-

sons, through jealousy and from the mere love of cruelty, there is in my opinion only one name for them : they are brutes."

He saw by her face that he had found a way to her heart at last, though by a strange road.

"It seems to me," said Mr. Robert to his wife, "that Ruth is taking advantage of her opportunities. Sir Charles and she have already found some common ground of sympathy."

"It's Shelley, no doubt," returned the invalid contemptuously ; she was by no means pleased that the guest of the evening had not sought the neighbourhood of her sofa instead of the conversation chair ; she had evidently made a favourable impression on him, and he could have flirted with Ruth at any time, whereas, as he ought to have known, her nerves were not always equal to the mental strain of conversation. To-morrow, after such unusual excitement, she would probably be a wreck.

"I don't care whether it's Shelley or shellfish, if only the topic helps her on the way to Hurlby Castle," observed Mr. Robert, more bluntly—for Mr. Grueby's conduct was still

rankling in his mind—than he was in the habit of speaking to his delicate consort.

"Robert, you shock me," returned the lady reproachfully. "How can Shelley—a pagan, I believe—ever form the groundwork of a union of hearts?"

"All marriages are not made where I venture to think ours was, Popsy," returned her husband gently..

"But in this case there is such a disparity of ages," she returned plaintively. "Ruth is so very young, that really I feel hardly justified in doing what little I have done to-night to encourage Sir Charles."

"Encourage! You have charmed him, my dear, which is little to be wondered at; but you are far from having anything to reproach yourself with on that account. A husband is often all the more devoted for being his wife's senior. Why, you are younger than I am, for instance."

"Flatterer! It is only by a few months, you know."

"It seems years, to look at you, my precious; and, at all events, it is fortunate for some girls

that they do not set their hearts only on those who are their contemporaries."

"To be sure, it would be deplorable if Lawrence and Ruth should fall in love with one another, would it not?" replied the lady pathetically.

"Lawrence? I should like to catch the fellow at it," returned the other, with scornful vehemence.

"He is uncommonly handsome," observed the lady, with feminine persistence.

Nobody could have said that of her husband at that moment. Praise of the helpless lad, seldom as he heard it, was wormwood to him; and in this case it was the more bitter because it proceeded from one whom it was unadvisable to contradict.

Miss Jane's song now came to a conclusion, and Mr. Robert clapped his hands applaudingly, but with an expression of face such as an Eastern despot might wear when summoning his Chancellor of the Bowstring, and which did not escape Sir Charles's eye as he applauded likewise. To have a cigar with that man alone while under the necessity of being civil to him

would, he reflected, be intolerable; and yet a cigar he must presently have. His little pleasures had all the force of duties with him.

"What does your uncle do with himself after dinner?" he inquired of Ruth abruptly.

"He generally goes to grandpapa's room."

"A filial duty," he replied approvingly. "Now since you tell me everyone smokes in this house, I conclude Lawrence smokes; would you mind asking him to let me be his companion for half an hour."

"Nothing would give him greater pleasure, I am sure," said Ruth; "his sitting-room is at least clean and airy, if it is not furnished with much splendour. I will tell him to call for you when you gentlemen retire."

"A good song, and very well sung, was it not, Sir Charles?" exclaimed Mr. Grueby.

"It was not only well, but charmingly sung," replied the baronet, rising and approaching the piano. "It is so long since I have been in the musical world, Miss Stratton, that my opinion is not worth much; but since I last heard professional singing of the highest class, there has been nothing that has given me so much pleasure."

Miss Jane's face grew red with pleasure—though not in the proper place; she was one of those women whose colour rises everywhere but on her cheeks.

"You are very good to say so, but I feel I am not in voice to-night."

She had really acquitted herself very well, and was quite aware of it; singing was the one accomplishment she possessed.

"Then I shall look forward to to-morrow night with eagerness," he answered, a reply not only flattering but politic, since it put a stop to further performances for the present. She closed the music book, and rose, and the other ladies followed her example. Sir Charles, as they bade him good-night, gave their hands a tender squeeze, which each translated after her own fashion; he smiled effusively on all, except Mrs. Merridew, whose hand, however, he pressed with particular significance. He had already learnt enough of the character of the company, to know that any favour shown to that unhappy lady would be turned to her disadvantage.

When the last petticoat had left the room, "Now let us enjoy ourselves," exclaimed Mr.

Grueby hilariously; "Stratton has got the mellowest whiskey, Sir Charles, that ever you tasted."

"I never touch whiskey," returned the baronet with a cold smile, "and if our host will excuse me, I prefer to retire."

The vicar's jaw dropped, for he was by no means desirous of a *téte-à-téte* with his friend, wherein his conduct at table was likely to be criticised, but Sir Charles's tone admitted of no remonstrance. Mr. Robert accompanied his guest to his room—not an unnecessary courtesy in the labyrinth of Hillsland Hall—and left him there with effusive wishes for a good night's rest; repaid I am sorry to say, when the door had closed on his retreating person, by the muttered ejaculation, "Beast!"

CHAPTER X.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN POETRY.

Sir Charles had but just exchanged his coat for a smoking jacket, and his evening shoes for slippers, when there was a light tap at his door, and Lawrence Merridew presented himself. He wore the same clothes he had had on when they had parted from one another on the hill; their patched and frayed condition were in such strong contrast to the other's gorgeous raiment, that it forced itself upon the visitor's eye, in spite of himself. And yet this lad was a son of the house, removed only by a generation from the man who had just been playing the host. The best instincts of the baronet's nature revolted against this unnatural discrepancy. On the other hand, the young fellow's face, as compared with his uncle's, was that of a Hyperion to a Satyr; good breeding and intelligence showed

themselves in every line of it—though physically he could hardly be termed handsome, it was full of intellectual grace. Sir Charles had that weakness for youth and good looks, which in men of his stamp does duty for pity and tenderness, and it intensified his just indignation.

"If you will come to my poor sitting-room," said the lad, "and bring your cigars with you, for I regret to say I have none to offer you, you will find it at least large and airy, and it will save you the discomfort of sleeping in a smoky atmosphere."

"Oh, as to that," returned the other smiling, "I am not very particular, and I am afraid that I am sometimes so lost to a sense of propriety as to smoke in bed. But I shall be glad of your companionship over the social weed, and gladly accept your offer of an asylum."

Lawrence nodded, and led the way through many a passage and corridor, and up stair after stair.

"Well, upon my life, it *is* a warren," exclaimed Sir Charles, as he toiled after his guide.

"Hush," returned the other, "there are ferrets about."

The seriousness of the young gentleman's tone no less than the appropriateness of the remark, upset the gravity of the visitor; he had some humour of his own, and a keen appreciation of it in others, but amusement of any kind was a rare luxury with him. He had passed the time when it can be purchased.

"Do you mean your uncle?" he inquired.

"Yes; he and that foulmart, the parson, have just gone into the smoking-room yonder. I heard the door shut."

Sir Charles, shaking with mirth, began to tread lightly as a truant schoolboy passing his master's door. He had enjoyed nothing so much as this clandestine adventure, with its *soupçon* of impropriety as regarded the laws of hospitality, for years.

"This is my den, Sir Charles," said the lad presently, ushering his companion into a large bare apartment furnished with three chairs, a deal table, and a bookcase obviously "knocked up" by the village carpenter. There were no curtains, and the moonlight without illumined it quite as much as the two tallow candles that flared and guttered on the table.

"There's plenty of room in it, at all events," observed his guest, seizing the sole opportunity for praise that presented itself, "and, by Jove, what a fine view you have from your windows."

"Yes, that is a luxury the value of which Aunt Jane does not understand, or she would doubtless have left me with a brick wall to look at," was the bitter reply.

"You must not say a word against Aunt Jane, please," said Sir Charles with mock gravity. "She has just been delighting me with her fine voice; she sang like a nightingale."

"I wish she had sung like a swan," was the grim reply, "for then we should have heard the last of her."

Sir Charles, with his nose flattened against the window-pane, said nothing, but his shoulders shook.

"Here," he was thinking to himself "is a *rara avis*, a satirist of twenty. I was like that myself once." But he never had been like it. His cynicism, artificial from the first, had grown to its present dimensions out of very different materials; out of wealth and idleness, and ennui; in this boy it had been born of wrong, and want,

and ill-usage. It was clear that Aunt Jane was not a topic suitable for discussion over the genial weed.

"How far can one see from these windows in the daytime? There is a mist on the lake, which suggests immensity."

"Well, it *is* a good size, and also uncommonly deep, but on a clear day, you can catch a glimpse of the sea itself. The view is then really worth looking at. 'The crowded farms and lessening towers that mingle with the bounding main.'"

"You are fond of poetry, Master Lawrence. Well, so was I once, though now I can no longer enjoy, but only criticise. Life with me is reduced to its lowest terms."

"And yet you have everything in the world that you can want," put in the other, with a quickness which showed it was not the first time that reflection had occurred to him.

"Quite true, but unfortunately I want nothing. My desires are comprehended in the one word Comfort, which, however, includes plenty of tobacco. Take a cigar."

Sir Charles produced from his pocket a case of the size of a small portmanteau.

"Thank you," returned the other, selecting one of its Gargantuan tenants. "I have never seen such a giant as this, not even as 'the Marchioness' says, 'in shops.'"

"It has not a giant's strength, it will not hurt you."

"Strength? I am not at all afraid of that," smiled the lad; "this is the sort of thing I smoke."

He produced a cake of tobacco, quite hard, and intensely black.

The baronet took it up and examined it with unaffected interest. "Dear me, what *is* it?"

"It is cheap," returned the young fellow quietly; "the name of the brand is of secondary importance."

"But you have to use tools, a pickaxe, if not blasting powder."

"No, I cut it with a knife."

"My poor boy; and yet the Satrap is said to be the richest man in these parts."

"The Satrap?"

"I mean your grandfather. He is so magnificent and mysterious that I am always searching about for some noble name to fit him."

"His grandson, however, has only a shilling a week pocket money," returned the other drily.

"A shilling a week!" The vexed question of "What is a Pound?" seemed to be recurring to Sir Charles's mind in connection with this very inferior coin; what was a shilling? It did not even represent the price of one of his cigars. "If the Commissioner treats you in this way I shall have to find quite another class of names for him. I had no idea he was so restricted in his ideas. Let us call him the Commissionaire."

"Oh, it's not my grandfather; he is scarcely aware of my existence. It is Uncle Robert and Aunt Jane. 'You must keep him short,' they say to my poor mother, who, indeed, has no means of keeping me long—I mean otherwise."

The mixture of humour and bitterness in the lad was curious. If he had been doing his best to make himself agreeable to his companion, instead of speaking out of the fulness of his heart, he could not have hit upon a better way. Sir Charles was not only amused but something more. With every puff of his cigar he felt more kindly towards the young fellow, and more antagonistic to his enemies.

"Have you no friends, my lad, beside the one you have made to-day," he said, gently, "and, of course, your mother?"

A flush of gratitude came into the boy's face; he beheld a patron, as he thought, in his companion, but without a patron's manners, which would have been intolerable to him; for though poor as Job he was proud as Lucifer. Sir Charles understood the flush perfectly well, but from a natural delicacy of mind, and also because he wished for information upon another point, he affected to ascribe it to another cause.

"Your face, my boy, has already answered my question. You *have* a friend under this roof beside your mother, and almost as dear to you. She is the young lady to whom I owe the pleasure of your society to-night, is it not so?"

Again the young fellow blushed, but answered without embarrassment, "Yes, Ruth is a true friend; and as brave as she is true. She dares to be kind to me even in my uncle's presence. Sometimes I think," exclaimed the boy, rising from his chair and pacing the room in uncontrollable excitement, "I shall stick a knife into that man.

You don't know what a false and cruel brute he is."

"I can make a tolerable guess at it; but never, my dear fellow, use a knife. There can be no 'misadventure' about a knife. If you must needs resort to such strong measures use a revolver, which is always liable to go off by accident. Shall I send you one by parcels post?"

"Well, of course, I was not in earnest," returned Lawrence, with half a smile, "though the man I am speaking of would have no scruple about murder, if his own neck was safe. I have seen it in his eye a score of times."

"That is the worst of having an expressive countenance, when one is a scoundrel," observed Sir Charles philosophically. "Our friend Mr. Grueby's face is a blank, which has been of great advantage to him. It is one thing to have a forehead with scoundrel written on it like a birthmark, and quite another to have it merely a clean space for other people to write upon, when they have found you out. You may say he *has* been found out, but it gave him time in which to misbehave himself unsuspected; and he did not

lose the opportunity. A parson is like a woman ; when he's bad, he's very bad."

"And when he's good, he's very good," remarked Lawrence, in a tone of conviction.

"You have discovered that, have you?" said the other incredulously.

Sir Charles had his reasons — explicable enough, if not very good ones, for disliking clergymen of all sorts. It is customary with men of his class and kind to think contemptuously of them; they find a reproach to themselves in their very existence, their sacred calling; they disbelieve in their faith and fancy that themselves must disbelieve in it; they belittle their works, or even impute to them a dishonest motive. Whatever was good in Sir Charles— and there was good—was, as it were, outside *their* good, and had no connection with it.

"The best man I have ever known, however," observed Lawrence gravely ("present company excepted," interpolated the other) "was a clergyman. It was my old tutor, Mr. Percy."

The frown, that fruit of opposition, which hung upon Sir Charles's brow, grew darker.

"Percy was your tutor, was he?" he said in an altered tone; there was marked displeasure in it, which however escaped the other's notice. He was too full of his subject, which was a very interesting one to him, to regard it.

"Yes; though unfortunately only for a few months. Do you know him?"

"I did know him at one time," returned Sir Charles indifferently.

"Then I am sure you liked him," cried the young fellow enthusiastically.

To this there was no response.

"I suppose his lessons were thought too dear for you by your good uncle."

"No, it was not that. Mr. Percy would, I believe, have taught me for nothing, but he fell out with Mr. Grueby."

"I remember; pulled him up before the Bishop. Well, in mustering our forces, we may leave Mr. Percy out of our calculations as being too far off to be an ally. Is there no one else in the house, save those you have mentioned, who wishes you well?"

"No one, save Aunt Jerry."

"Aunt Jerry? One would think she was an uncle."

"Yes. It was from her husband's Christian name, indeed, that she derives her own. It was Jeremiah."

"To be sure. He made some figure in these parts at one time as a mine owner, but was eventually swallowed up by his own property, like the eagle transfixed by the arrow sped from his own wing. Not that he was much like an eagle in other respects, if I remember right."

"Still he was thought highly enough of till he died a pauper. You may imagine the position of the widow of such a failure among her relatives at the Hall? She is ill and broken, and they affect to believe she is 'not all there.'"

"She is so far to be congratulated," observed Sir Charles drily. "There is on your side then your mother, Miss Ruth, and Aunt Jerry; and against you the pro-consul, Mr. Robert, and Miss Jane."

Lawrence nodded. "Equal in number but very disproportionate in strength," he sighed.

"And there is the usual complement of spies and underlings on the stronger side, I conclude."

"No. I have no enemy among the servants. I don't say I have deserved their goodwill; perhaps it is because they hate their master and mistress; but they are as civil to me as though I had the power of rewarding them."

Sir Charles thought to himself that in the case of such a comely and pleasant young fellow there might be a reason for the sympathy of at least all female hearts.

"It is a humiliation to us, though they are far from intending it," continued the lad, "that both Aunt Jerry and I see that they pity us."

"You two are in Coventry together, then?"

"Yes, when anyone is at the Hall, and in the evening she and I are always condemned to have our meals in her room. We are not thought good enough for the dining-room society."

"Well, upon my life, it seems to me that any change should be welcome to you, my poor boy. I heard something said about Singapore."

The young fellow's face grew troubled. "Yes, I am to be sent there in a year's time, to fill a vacancy that will occur there in a merchant's office. It doubtless seems to you that I ought to 'jump at it,' but I don't jump."

"Home has still certain attractions for you, then," observed the other, looking critically at his cigar.

"No, it is not that, or not entirely that; but since you are so kind as to show an interest in my poor affairs, I may say that I have the vanity to believe that if I could once get the chance, I could make my own living in England."

"Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay, eh?"

"There is something of that in it, no doubt; but at the risk of arousing your ridicule——"

"There is no risk of that," put in Sir Charles gently; "if you have the least fear of wearing your heart upon your sleeve lest I should peck at it, dismiss it. Though no more like an eagle than was your uncle Jerry, I am no daw."

"I am sure of that," said Lawrence earnestly. "But I know what is thought of young persons who flatter themselves they have a turn for literature and hope to make a living by their pen."

"And what is it you think you may be able to write?"

"Stories."

"Well, well, it might have been worse," said Sir Charles, with a little sigh of relief.

"Might it?" returned Lawrence in a voice half humorous, half plaintive. "How could it have been worse?"

"Well, it might have been poetry, my dear fellow."

CHAPTER XI.

THE COURAGE OF HIS OPINIONS.

THERE was silence for awhile between the two companions—so different in their natures and yet, as it seemed, so well pleased with one another —at that word "poetry." Lawrence, for the first time, looked a little embarrassed; his lips parted as if about to speak, but nothing came of it; the amused smile which should by right have illumined the baronet's features remained *perdu;* he had the cynic's faculty of making a dark lantern of his mirth. It would have been easy enough to pursue the subject, for he already had the data, but he wished the confessions of his young friend to be voluntary and not extorted.

"As to stories, my good lad, you are quite right in supposing that that is the only line of business to be adopted in literature, if you want more than bread and cheese; but you will forgive

me for saying that it is necessary to have a story to tell."

"Not at all," said Lawrence laughing, "to judge by the success of yonder novels," and he pointed to a pile of cheap fiction, chiefly of transatlantic origin, heaped upon his bookcase.

"True; but there is a certain knowledge of life that does not come by instinct, and which writers of twenty years of age do not possess. Even novel readers prefer seasoned wits—experience that is at least equal to their own."

"I know it, I know it," exclaimed the young fellow impatiently; "but I am really not such a fool as you think me."

"If you think that, it is a very small tribute to my discernment," put in Sir Charles smiling. "If it was so I should not be here, for example; I hate a fool much more, I fear, than a knave."

"I am speaking of the apparent folly of my expectations," returned the young fellow, taking no notice of the implied compliment. "My position is rather peculiar: I have read a good deal of what I believe will be of service for my purpose; and my surroundings, you will admit, are exceptional."

"He is going to lampoon his relatives," thought the baronet to himself. "Upon my word they would make good material."

"I am thoroughly acquainted with such life as is to be found in Hillsland," continued Lawrence, "both above and below ground, and I think that I have some faculty of description."

He spoke not only with confidence—which is common enough with literary beginners—but in a tone of intense conviction; with the air, too, of one who has looked long at the subject on which he discourses, and from all points of view. It began to occur to Sir Charles's mind that in his friendly feeling towards this budding genius he had "let himself in" for more than he had intended. He still, however, felt kindly disposed to the lad, while the sense of responsibility with which the giving advice to the young troubles some people, sat so lightly on his shoulders as not to be perceptible.

"I have told you I have sunk to the condition of a critic, my good fellow," he said cheerfully, "and though my opinion may be of the usual value of 'advice gratis,' it is quite at your service; if you will show me some of your produc-

tions, of which I am sure you have many, and they are of moderate length—eh? Why do you laugh?"

Lawrence, indeed, was laughing heartily. The apprehensions of his companion had made themselves so manifest under the cloak (though it was no disguise) of friendly interest, that it was too much for his sense of humour.

"Though it might not have been so bad as an epic, you feared that it might be a three-volume novel," he said smiling. "Perhaps it even struck you that I might have offered to read it to you?"

"No, no, my dear fellow, I didn't think that," said Sir Charles with apologetic haste, "the man who lays his hand upon one of his own manuscripts, and even in the way of kindness reads it aloud to his friend, deserves—well, deserves to have a Robert Stratton for his uncle."

"Quite true, and you can't go further than that," said Lawrence gravely. "But since you are so very kind as to offer me your opinion—which will be invaluable to me, for I know no one to consult on such matters—I will some day put a specimen or two of my poor productions

into your hands. Now I will not talk shop any more—good heavens, the coffee!"

"Is there coffee? I shall almost think it comes from heaven."

"A thousand pardons; but I am unused to the obligations of hospitality. Your kindness and sociability drove everything else out of my mind, but coffee is the one thing I can give you. My grandfather, in a fit of generosity, or in some sudden recollection of her existence, once gave Aunt Jerry some which is really excellent, and she gave me a share of it."

"Long live the Rajah!" exclaimed Sir Charles enthusiastically. "No one can tell what I have suffered, my good lad, for the last hour. Your conversation is delightful, but I confess I did want my coffee."

If Lawrence had entertained a doubt—which he had not—of the genuineness of his friend's sentiments hitherto, there could be no suspicion at least of this one. The drink in question was one of those "comforts" he had confessed were indispensable to him. The host went to a cupboard and brought out a battered coffee-pot and a spirit lamp, while his guest, with a cigar

in his mouth and a languid interest in his eye, examined the book-case.

"You have Byron's works here, I see. 'Childe Harold' seems to have been a recent acquisition, and 'Don Juan' an earlier; it is more thumbed, at all events."

"Well, the fact is, I can't read the 'Childe.' At the risk of falling in your estimation I must admit he wearies me."

"Never mind my estimation; always speak your mind with me. As it happens, I think no worse of you. I have been at all the places described, which of course adds an interest to the poem, and yet he wearies me."

"Byron seems to me melodramatic; too much given up to egotism and vanity; he suggests nothing."

The baronet smiled.

"Well, it is not my mission to defend him. 'Other men other minds,' is an aphorism which applies to the poet most of all; the generation who most esteems him is almost always his own generation, though not perhaps at first."

"That was not the way with Shelley and Keats."

"True, nor with Tennyson, though I can remember when Tennyson was pronounced 'girlish' and even 'unintelligible.' A great scholar, a friend of mine, always shook his head at 'Tears, idle Tears' because he couldn't put it into Latin verse."

"That would be my difficulty, too," said Lawrence laughing; "and yet to me it is the most beautiful and suggestive poem in the language."

"If that is your opinion of it at twenty, you may judge what is mine at fifty, when one feels what you only imagine."

"And yet you tell me you are no longer appreciative?"

"Well, I suppose one is human after all," returned the other, "that is occasionally."

He looked annoyed, like a man about town, who is recognised by an acquaintance while piloting a blind beggar across the street. "You have 'Don Quixote' and 'Gil Blas,' I see, which everybody reads—enough to swear by."

"Yes. Bury me in what living tomb you please," said Lawrence pathetically, "but give me my 'Don Quixote,' and a light to read it by,

and I am content. Strip me of house and land, but leave me 'Gil Blas,' and you will never rob me of my mirth."

The baronet laughed outright. "Upon my life, my young friend, you have the courage of your opinions; but you will find it just as well to keep them to yourself, if you mean to be on good terms with the critics. Here is 'Tristram Shandy,' that, too, is not dropping to pieces from over use, I notice."

"How is it possible to like a book in which the author rarely finishes a chapter, or even a sentence, and 'gets no forrarder' in a hundred pages; it is like driving a gig from John O'Groat's house to the Land's End with a jibbing horse. There are occasional indecencies, I admit, but not nearly so many as he is credited with."

"And that is the way you speak of one of our British classics!" cried the baronet, holding up his delicate hands.

"Well, the fact is, I suppose, that being cut off from all occupation and amusement, I have been compelled to *read* the immortal Sterne, which is not the case with the majority of his

admirers—Here's your coffee, Sir Charles, at last."

But the baronet, capricious even in his desires, had already fixed his attention elsewhere. "Why here is an unpublished volume; a treasure in MS.; by Jingo, and in verse too. Why you're a rhymester after all!"

"I never said I wasn't," replied the young fellow doggedly; "no one is bound to criminate himself; besides, you only said in speaking of my literary ambition you were 'glad it was not poetry'; and so far you may be glad still."

"Your modesty does you credit, my lad, but these verses begin well.

> "'Cherry cheeked, merry eyed,
> Lip apart, head aside,
> Crowned with thy golden hair;
> Maiden, this youth of thine,
> Far more than men or wine,
> Breedeth joy, slayeth care.'

"They are addressed 'To——,' I see, quite on the old fashion."

"Yes, they are," observed Lawrence drily.

"A very proper reproof to my curiosity," returned the other, closing the little book. "It

is a private volume, and I ought not to have opened it."

"Why should you not have done so, since it was in the bookcase with the rest? I had no intention of inflicting any of its contents upon you, but since you have them there they are quite at your service." Sir Charles resumed his seat, and sipped his coffee, book in hand; he turned over its pages with languid interest. "Melancholy, of course," he murmured, as if to himself; "when we are young and vigorous we are melancholy out of 'pure cussedness,' when we grow old we are so by compulsion. 'Lines on dejection!' 'Farewell,' it's like saying 'good-bye' instead of 'good morning.' 'Poverty,' well you do know something about that, my lad. What's this? 'The Home Spirit.'

"'Like a sunbeam gliding over common places,
About this dreary home of ours she moves,
What'er her hands are set unto she graces,
Her duties not beneath the things she loves.'

"A good line that.

"'Serene, unconscious of her perfect sweetness,
As one of those moss-roses she hath tied

In clustered beauty, with some art past neatness
As born high-heartedness excelleth pride.'

"Pretty, *very*. What follows too is good, and the last verse charming,

"'Ah! bliss to him to whom she shall be given!
Fond heart, clear head, pure soul and form so fair,
Her spirit well might cleave to it in Heaven,
And meet him changeless and unangeled there.'

"Has the angel ever seen this?"

"What angel?" inquired Lawrence, looking into his coffee cup, as if to tell his fortune by the dregs.

"The young lady to whom these lines are addressed. She walks the earth, I suppose, at present?"

"Yes; she has seen them."

"And the other?"

"What other?"

"Come, come, you might credit me with some small degree of intelligence. 'Lip apart, head aside, crowned with golden hair.' Has *she* seen *that?*"

"Yes, 'the other,' as you call her, has seen that."

"Then I will ask no more questions, though one more was on the tip of my tongue."

"Pray ask it, if you have a mind."

"I was going to inquire whether the angel had seen the other verses, or the lady with the golden hair those addressed to the angel; but it is unnecessary, for I am quite sure they have not—there now, I have annoyed you; I cannot say how I regret it. I told you I was a cynic, but I did not mean to be rude; pray forgive me."

"I have done that already," said the young fellow, but the cloud still sat on his mobile face. "I can't afford to quarrel with you."

"Ah, that is cruel, a weapon forbidden by the comity of nations. Put yourself in my place."

"True," said Lawrence penitently, "I should not have said it, but what you have just said about melancholy applies to us in a reverse sense as regards bitterness. You are bitter because it is your fancy to be so; I am bitter from circumstances over which I have no control."

"You are quite right, and I have been quite

wrong," continued the baronet, holding out his hand. "And in token of forgiveness I must ask you to pilot me back to my own room. I shall know my way here before I leave Hillsland Hall, for we shall, I hope, have many another chat together."

CHAPTER XII.

THE HONOURED GUEST.

Sir Charles had been no hypocrite in his show of interest in the affairs of his young friend. He even felt a sort of gratitude to him for having evoked it. Sentiment of almost all kinds was well-nigh dead within him, and he was not displeased to have it resuscitated. It has been well observed that we do not leave our vices, our vices leave us, and the same thing is true of our nobler emotions; as we grow old, and especially if we have passed our lives in idleness and pleasure, not only our illusions, but our sympathies, gradually die out. In some cases, avarice, the desire of useless gain, swallows up, like Aaron's rod, all other feelings, but from that curse, at least, Sir Charles was free He was by no means too much of a gentleman to do things that were base, but he shrank from

anything sordid; his nature, if not delicate, was fastidious. But he only spoke the simple truth when he had said that he cared only for comfort; as regarded all other matters his character had become a stagnant pool. There still, however, lay within it in process of dissolution some elements of good, and they had been brought to the surface by Lawrence Merridew. He was genuinely interested in the young fellow; the contempt and neglect with which he was treated by his relatives aroused his indignation, while at the same time it flattered the baronet's self-esteem. The behaviour of Mr. Robert and Miss Jane were, he persuaded himself, exactly what was to be expected, and corroborated his cynical and pessimistic views of life.

There was something else, too, which quickened his decaying interests. Mr. Robert was a far cleverer knave than he gave him credit for, and had shown his cleverness in baiting his hook for the *blasé* baronet. He had gathered that Sir Charles had been struck with Ruth, when he met her at the bazaar, and had rightly concluded that his admiration of her would be increased by a nearer acquaintance. Certain

Eastern jewels in the ex-Commissioner's possession—he had quite a collection of such treasures—about which Sir Charles had expressed some curiosity, had favoured the pretext for inviting him to Hillsland Hall, but the unconscious Ruth was the Kohinoor on whose beauty he relied to dazzle his father's guest; and this object had been so far accomplished.

To say that Sir Charles had fallen in love with her, would indeed have been a monstrous exaggeration; but he was greatly struck with her. In his youth he had been a victim to the fair sex; later on these relations had been reversed; and in his maturity he had still a weakness for them, though tempered by experience. At fifty years of age, however, he was still vain enough to imagine that, if he chose to take trouble enough, he could inspire even a girl with the tender passion; he possessed very great and rare advantages for such a conquest, and did not underrate them. On the other hand, it was necessary that the young person in question should be somewhat isolated, ignorant of the world, and (especially) without other suitors more eligible as regarded age. He could have won

her perhaps away even from them, unwillingly; but with that he would not have been content. He was exacting in that respect. Much as he had admired Ruth in the drawing-room, he had a suspicion that his admiration was thrown away from the manner in which she spoke of Lawrence; if her affections were already fixed on her cousin, he felt it was hopeless to attempt to win them, though he might win *her*. If *he* had been charmed with the young fellow on so short an acquaintance, he could easily understand how attractive he must be to one of the other sex, living under the same roof with him, and deeply sympathising with the unmerited cruelty with which he was treated. His poverty, his wrongs, his lack of friends, would be so many claims upon her generosity and tenderness.

In the face of such rivalship the baronet would have withdrawn from the struggle, though backed by all the grandfathers, aunts, and uncles in Christendom. With Lawrence Merridew in his mind's eye, it was impossible to regard his own maturer charms with complacency, and though he could give him many points in the art of pleasing, the natural attraction of the lad

—his enthusiasm, his literary ambition, his touching, though doubtless misplaced confidence in himself, and his youthful brightness—would outweigh his efforts even in that direction. But his conversation with Lawrence that evening, so far at least as that young gentleman was concerned, had relieved his mind with respect to Ruth; he felt convinced that the lad's affections were engaged elsewhere, no doubt to the young lady in whose company he had seen him in the orchard that day. The verses, the discovery of which had caused Lawrence such embarrassment, described her personal appearance, so far as Sir Charles remembered it, and he had still a sharp eye for a pretty face, accurately enough; whereas the reading those other verses evidently depicting someone else, and presumably Ruth, had awakened in their composer no embarrassment at all. They were not like the former, a picture drawn by passionate admiration, but merely, at most, by tender esteem. In eliciting this information Sir Charles had been obliged to run the risk of giving offence to his young friend, but it had been worth the risk, and no offence, save for the passing moment, had been taken.

Without confessing as much to himself, he felt more pleased with Lawrence, as regarded this matter, than with all else. His impulse to befriend him and assist his simple plans was greatly strengthened by it. To do good to one's enemies is an injunction which a good many people find it difficult to obey, and it is possible that Sir Charles's generous intentions towards Lawrence would have dwindled away had he found in him a rival. As matters stood, he felt all the vehemence of goodwill which is entertained by those who only very seldom propose to themselves a scheme of benevolence; moreover, it was aided by a cordial dislike for Lawrence's persecutors.

Mr. Robert had made a very bad impression on him; nor, curiously enough, did he thank him for the opportunity he had afforded him of approaching Ruth herself, the motives for which, while entirely exculpating her from all collusion with them, he thoroughly understood. Miss Jane, he thought, almost equally objectionable: a hard woman, even with the mitigations of youth and good looks, was hateful to him; and cruelty and oppression—for though he had been

very cruel in his time, and taken advantage of the weakness of others, his conduct had never appeared to him in that light—were revolting to his nature.

The question that now presented itself to Sir Charles was not so much how to help his young friend, about which he felt tolerably sanguine, but how to show friendship to him without arousing the anger or increasing the bitterness of his enemies. He might, indeed, have ignored him, and only sought his companionship, as he had already done, surreptitiously; but there were limits to his self-denial. His capacity for boredom was exceedingly small; he could not even, for Lawrence's sake, endure any period of imprisonment at the Hall, combined with the hard labour of making himself agreeable to Mr. Robert, or listening to the ex-Commissioner's lectures upon irrigation. He must have some intelligent person to converse with. He was not a man that could stand being shown over the stables every morning, by anybody; or talked to about the crops, which at Hillsland were mostly underground. It would be a little difficult to get out of all this without compromising his

protégé, but it must be done somehow or other, and though not till after, what he was disinclined to give to any matter, a little serious consideration, he thought he saw his way.

At breakfast time next morning, Lawrence appeared with the rest, but not in his usual rags. Attire was not a matter that, even in his salad days, had had much attraction for Sir Charles. "If a man is a trump," he had been wont to say, "it signifies nothing about his suit;" but the spruceness of the lad's costume was a revelation to his new friend. He gathered from it, at once, that their companionship of the previous evening had become known, and that since the honoured guest had taken an inexplicable fancy to this insignificant member of the household, his relatives had thought it worth while that the lad should be attired like a gentleman. And so indeed it was. It had been Mr. Robert's intention to keep him out of sight during Sir Charles's stay, since he shrewdly suspected that whatever the lad might have to say to him would not be to the credit of his rulers and betters; but now that the mischief had been done, it was clearly injudicious to corroborate by an open show of

ill-treatment any slanders he may have uttered. The fact was that Mr. Robert, ferreting about in "the Warren," had actually come upon his nephew on his way to his own room after leaving that of Sir Charles. He had been in hopes of having caught him out in some delinquency, but the lad's manner, always bold enough, at once convinced him by its "infernal impertinence" (as he afterwards described it to Aunt Jane) that he had been mistaken.

"If you want to know what I have been about——"

"I do," put in Mr. Robert furiously.

"I have been smoking a cigar with Sir Charles Walden."

It was an unpleasant piece of information as it stood, but if he had known how large a share Sir Charles's dislike of himself had had to do with it, Mr. Robert Stratton would have been still more disgusted; as it was he set it down to the baronet's disinclination to the company of Mr. Grueby, for which he was compelled to admit there was some excuse. The parson and he had had that matter out together, not entirely to his own advantage, and the Master of the

House had at a later hour, dwelt upon his clerical friend's behaviour with much distinctness of condemnation. "For the future, sir, at all events," the old gentleman had fumed out, "since your plan of introducing a drunken helot for his entertainment has broken down, see that Sir Charles has his own way while he remains with us in every particular."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE "STRETCHER."

"See that Sir Charles has his own way." That fiat of the ex-Commissioner's, delivered with all the vehemence of which he was capable (and this was still considerable), was of great service to the baronet's plan. On the previous day, Mr. Robert had endeavoured to impress him with the extent and pressing nature of his occupations, "The cares of a vast estate which my father is no longer in a condition to superintend, etc. etc.," and this his guest now opportunely called to mind.

"You must not treat me, Mr. Robert, as a stranger within your gates," he said. "There is no greater nuisance in a house where the host has his duties to perform than a mere idler; if I am not to be looked upon as one of the family, I shall take myself off."

It was quite touching to see how Miss Jane was affected by this threat, at once so terrible and so friendly. "If you can only be content with our goodwill, Sir Charles—for I am afraid we have few attractions indeed to offer you——" Here she stopped, doubtless from emotion, and placed her hand upon her niece's shoulder, who happened to be her neighbour, either for support or in illustration of the attractions of which she spoke.

"Content?" he said, "if only I can feel assured that I am putting no one to inconvenience I shall enjoy myself thoroughly. I always think that in large country houses such as this, the guest is happiest who is left to his own devices, unless, indeed, he is one of those miserable men who requires to be amused."

"But some of us ladies who have nothing to do," observed Miss Jane, "will be very happy to entertain you, or at all events to do their best to do so," and again she suffered her fingers to stray caressingly on Ruth's shoulder.

"I shall be troublesome enough to them, no doubt," he answered smiling, "but for this morning I have promised myself a long walk

with Master Lawrence, yonder, for my cicerone." His tone was as indifferent as he could make it, and he did not even so much as look at the lad as he spoke; but it was plain nevertheless that his proposal was not a welcome one to the lady of the house.

"Lawrence is at your service, of course," she said, with such marked coldness that Mr. Robert felt it his duty to tender an explanation of it.

"It seems to me, Sir Charles," he observed slily, "that you have made the ladies rather jealous."

"If any of them is equal to a ten mile stretch," exclaimed the guest, "I need not say how glad I shall be of her company; but I am under a vow, imposed by my medical adviser, to do that amount of walking whenever possible."

It was known that the baronet was a great pedestrian, though it was not so generally understood that he was under the doctor's hands, so that his transparent little fib passed muster; and for the rest of the meal he did his best to curry favour with Miss Jane (and at the same time to please himself) by paying attention to Ruth. *That*, he felt, was his best way out of his diffi-

culty as regarded Lawrence, and it was a very pleasant way. His proposal of companionship with her cousin had evidently gratified her; it was plain she admired his courage in exploding what was little less than a bombshell to her aunt and uncle in thus taking by the hand the object of their contempt and ill-treatment, and perhaps (he thought) she envied that social position which had enabled him to do it with impunity. The subject that most interested Ruth, when he had the opportunity of speaking with her out of earshot of the rest, he soon found to be Lawrence, which, though from one point of view unwelcome, was in another at least convenient. It was one which not only gave him an opportunity for eloquence, but also for presenting to her the most attractive side of his character, his sympathy with the weak, his contempt for the oppressor, and the interest he felt in the lad's literary ambition.

In public he prudently took as little notice of him as possible. He displayed the same caution as respected Mrs. Merridew, and even Aunt Jerry, so careful was he not to offend the higher powers more than could be helped. Why he

troubled himself to undertake a part so altogether strange to his nature and habits was a question he would have found some difficulty in answering; but though it could not be said, at present at all events, that he played it for love, he certainly threw himself into it *con amore*. Mrs. Jeremiah Lock, by the way, had been presented to him for the first time that morning; a spiritless and almost speechless lady, prematurely old, and who evidently shrank from all observation. Ruth had saluted her with great tenderness, which had power to revive her a little as water re-animates some fading flower, bound to wither, but her air and manner was with others painful in its humility; she appeared to be making a perpetual apology for her own existence, though it was pretty plain that she would not long give offence by it. The obvious delicacy of her state of health, indeed, gave a pathos to features which would have been otherwise uninteresting and commonplace enough.

Sir Charles, who was not without imagination, pictured her to himself as a once light-hearted and perhaps even comely woman, whose spirits had been crushed out of her by years of

dependence and oppression; but Aunt Jerry had been always dull and plain, though she had taken Mr. Lock's fancy, or whatever had been the substitute for it. She was thought at the time to have made the best match of the family, but the fortune her Jeremiah had made for himself was even then a little "dipped," and had gone on dipping (underground) until nothing remained of it but shares in unproductive mines, or what was worse, liabilities. Even those who had regarded her most charitably thought her "a poor creature," as indeed she was, and it had even been said of her that she was "a little touched in the upper decks;" in this, however, they were mistaken, though it would have been better for her, perhaps, had it been so; but—

> "To know the change and feel it,
> When there was none to heed it,
> Nor numbed sense to feel it,"

was poor Aunt Jerry's lot.

From the circumstance of their being both in the same condemnation by the authorities—though in her case this came from no particular antagonism, they only pronounced her "not

presentable"—Lawrence and she were thrown a good deal together; but the young fellow did not pretend to have much regard for her. He pitied and was kind to her, as he would have been to any creature in distress, but he had no more sympathy with her, individually, than she with him, and he would rather, perhaps, have been left to himself altogether, than to her commonplace company, except for certain material advantages—such as the coffee—which it brought him. But with Ruth it was different; when Aunt Jerry would sometimes complain, "I am not clever enough for Lorry; he doesn't care for a stupid, tedious old woman like me," it sent a pang through her tender heart. She would never blame her cousin. "Lorry is very peculiar, Aunt Jerry," she would reply, "he is rapt in quite other matters than those which concern you and me, but he is very fond of you, I'm sure," yet in secret she wished Lorry had been more genial with his relative. To her it signified little that Aunt Jerry cared nothing for music, poetry, painting, and the fine arts, and was in fact very dull and unattractive; the adversity into which she had fallen was claim

enough upon her goodwill, and the poor old woman (though she was not really old, though she seemed to be so both to herself and others) repaid her kindnesses with all the affection of which she was capable.

Something of this Sir Charles soon gathered from Ruth herself, for his frankness was contagious; and, indeed, when a man is really frank, and at the same time understands how to make his confidences agreeable, he possesses the very best equipment for the conquest of all hearts. That is, all tender ones; in dealing with others—the harsh ones—he is apt to be at a disadvantage. There is nothing, it is justly said, so attractive as naturalness, but that presupposes the same attribute in the person attracted. Sir Charles, for example, would certainly not have recommended himself to his host, or to his host's son, by a display of frankness; indeed, if he had carried that virtue to extremity his stay at Hillsland Hall would have come to an end at once; his very invitation, we may say, would have been incontinently cancelled. But his air of candour was, in his communications with them, most useful to him. He

had not only the *ars celare artem*, but the art of appearing most open when he was concealing his own sentiments, and even speaking in direct contradiction to them. "What gives me the greatest pleasure," he once said, "is to hoodwink scoundrels," but gratifying as that social amusement undoubtedly is, it is apt to encourage a habit of duplicity with reference even to honest members of the community; and as—

> "The playing the games whose moves are Death
> Makes a man draw too proud a breath,"

so the making fools or puppets of our fellow-creatures is apt to deteriorate the moral character.

No apprehension of that kind, however, ever entered Sir Charles's mind, or would perhaps have disturbed it, had it done so. Whatever were his faults, self-consciousness—that microscopical inspection of our feelings and their consequences which is so fashionable nowadays, but so deadly dull to read about in books—was not among them. If he had been a beggar living from hand to mouth, he could not have taken "shorter views" about everything. Sufficient for the day,

with him, was the pleasure thereof; and this cynical, brilliant, *blasé* man of the world was in his pleasures as impulsive as a schoolboy. That this idiosyncrasy had wrecked his life—though to the common eye there seemed so much of salvage about it as to make the disaster count for little—he was well aware ; but that did not alter matters nor him. A natural disposition, strengthened and encouraged by circumstances, is not like the backbone of a fish, that can be eliminated with a silver fork by a skilled hand; it remains with us till we drop into our graves.

Strange, therefore, as it might seem, and especially to those who thought they knew him best, Sir Charles started for his "stretcher" with his young friend that morning with almost the same sense of thoughtless enjoyment as his companion; the boy, in fact, was much the more thoughtful of the two, having as he imagined (as the other, indeed, would have readily acknowledged) much more to think about. The idea had not unnaturally taken root in his mind that it was possible he had found in his new friend a helper, nay—such had been the sympathy evinced in his literary aspirations—almost a helpmate,

small as seemed the opportunity. It was the first chink, as it were, through which the lad had seen daylight. Youth and hope are better castle builders (in the air) than can be found in the Society of Architects; somehow he ventured to believe that Sir Charles could smooth the way for him, if not to the dizzy heights of the Temple of Fame, at all events to some moderate elevation above the waters of want; and in the meantime he was immensely pleased at having been chosen for his cicerone in their morning's ramble.

Lawrence Merridew was a true lover of nature, and the task of pointing out the beauties of Hillsland was very congenial to him, for they were well worth attention. The village, a very picturesque one, was itself highly placed, but above it towered a great table-land, crested with forests of firs, from which there was a truly magnificent view. In the fresh and vigorous air that always blew there the odour of the pine trees was mingled with the "scent of the sea," borne inland for many a mile. Between the village and the ocean lay quite another district, that of the mines, but the disfigurements they

caused on the surface were from this altitude hardly noticeable, and merely gave variety to the landscape. Sir Charles listened to his young friend with less of interest than amusement, as he descanted enthusiastically upon this and that object of admiration; for he did not much care for "nature." The primrose by the river's brim was a primrose to him and nothing more, nor did the daffodil haunt his dreams; and he took a similar prosaic view of landscape. What it all suggested to the elder man, when it suggested anything, was of a wholly different kind to the thoughts it awakened in the younger. At the topmost clump of firs Lawrence halted—

"This is the finest view we have," he said. "Half the county lies beneath us."

"Yes; I was here once before," returned the other indifferently, but with a certain air of unpleasant reminiscence too, "when I was standing for it."

"When you were standing for what?" asked Lawrence puzzled.

"The county. You know nothing about it, of course," added the other, in reply to his look of astonishment, "and besides, I didn't get in."

"How was that?" said Lawrence, not quite knowing what he said; he felt that he had stumbled upon a disagreeable topic.

"Well—not that it signifies—but it was the tongue of slander." He murmured to himself contemptuously the well-known motto of a northern college, "They say; what say they? *Let* them say," and resumed his walk with rapid steps in silence.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE CORNER.

That long-continued silence was the first sign of egotism Sir Charles had manifested to his young companion. Considering their relative ages and positions he had hitherto shown an unlooked for abnegation of self; he had thrown himself, if not heart and soul, at all events with the appearance of so doing, into the other's affairs, with a complete abnegation of his own. But now, it seemed, he had begun to think of them. His smooth brow was furrowed, his "Cupidon" lips twitched with strange excitement, or closed together tightly. The impassive, gracious man was troubled with some reminiscence of his past. There were still living many men who would have said, "And no wonder," but they were not those who had known him best. His nature was not one given to retro-

spection, far less to cry over spilt milk. But that recollection of having been rejected for the county was bitter to him, for it had been one of the few occasions when his *amour propre* had been wounded. So it often happens in the long catalogue of our sins against God and man, that the consequence of one of them, though it may have been a very inadequate punishment for it, stands out in our memory, and makes us appear to ourselves aggrieved. It had been almost the only time, and was certainly the last, in which Sir Charles Walden had ever appealed to the opinion of his fellow-creatures, and it had been recorded against him. It had been a small matter—a very small one in comparison with other subjects of regret in his career, but none had made so great an impression upon him. There are some of us who have no remorse for serious offences, but it takes very little to embitter their lives. Hitherto Sir Charles had seemed to give himself up to the mood of his young companion, and even to take pains to say nothing of discouragement; but for the remainder of the walk he was at first *distrait*, and when he gradually recovered his self-possession, cynical.

"It is amazing to me," he presently said, "that with all this love of yours for nature, you should have such an ambition for things outside it; you ought to be a philosopher, or rather a philosophic poet, content with 'the root and the spring,' and never wish to stray from these charming surroundings."

"Well, I don't wish to exchange them for Singapore, it is very true," said Lawrence, his sense of gratitude to his companion (not perhaps unmixed with that of favours to come) struggling with a feeling of indignation at what seemed very like a sneer; "but though *you* may not see the necessity of it, Sir Charles, I must live, and even 'the root' you speak of would in my case not be forthcoming." Though the lad's tone was quiet, his face showed what he felt.

"Forgive me, my dear boy," said the other impulsively, "I spoke like a brute to whom roots are the proper nutriment. I wanted—or rather the devil within me wanted—to say something spiteful, and I said it to the wrong person. Why, that is Hurlby, is it not, out yonder?"

"Yes; your round tower just peeps above the trees; when the flag is flying, which I

suppose betokens your presence, it looks still more picturesque."

"You will see it nearer, soon, I hope, when the flag is flying," returned the other graciously. "There are some things in the castle that will please you."

Lawrence murmured a few words of thanks for the invitation, which indeed gave him great pleasure; and the more, since it was wholly unexpected; for he knew that Sir Charles lived the life of a recluse.

"I hope you won't find it so dull as I do," continued the baronet. "It is my experience, however, that one can stand a visit to almost everywhere *once*, always supposing one can get away when one likes."

"I trust that that tribute to the delights of hospitality," said Lawrence laughing, "does not imply that we shall not see you again at Hillsland?"

"If so, it will not be because the Hall wants attractions, I do assure you," said the other earnestly; then, more lightly, "perhaps the Rajah may not ask me again. I have a suspicion that I have not made a favourable im-

pression on him, and still less on your Uncle Robert."

"If it be so, that comes of befriending *me*," observed Lawrence gratefully.

"That is sad, for so far as I can I shall continue to earn his ill-will in that respect," answered the other smiling. "Now we are getting home again. Whose is that melancholy-looking house yonder, with the 'garden of the sluggard' attached to it?"

"That is Mr. Salesby's," said Lawrence with a slight flush.

"Then let us drop in and pay him a call: I owe him one, for he voted for me at the election. If Mr. Grueby is to be trusted—which, however, is doubtful—we shall get the latest Derby tip from him."

Lawrence cared nothing for Derby tips, though perhaps as much as Sir Charles did. The latter, indeed, was simply curious to see the young lady on whom, as he had reason to suspect, his young friend had set his affections, and of whom he had already caught a fleeting glance in the orchard on the previous day. He might also have wished to renew his acquaintance, if the

very little he knew of him could be so called, with Mr. Salesby, who was a "character" in his way, though not a good one. He belonged to one of the oldest families in the county, who, though they had never occupied a prominent position, had been in a fairly elevated one—till horse and hound had ruined their present representative. Dick Salesby had still a "bit of blood" on which he hunted twice a week in the season, but it was the last link with his palmy days that was left to him. His neighbours of the gentry still nodded to him in familiar fashion, but not even the humblest labourer touched his cap; the agricultural mind is dull, but it is keen to recognise superiority of position, and the want of it. His friends were only found in the pot-house, mostly hangers-on of the turf. Lawrence was ashamed of the man whom (in his brightest dreams) he pictured as his father-in-law, and of the ramshackly dwelling he called his home; but since his companion was bent on visiting it, there was no escape. He only hoped that Kitty would be away somewhere, for it would be dreadful if Sir Charles should see her—like a jewel set in pewter—amid such sordid surroundings.

"Why the place is to let!" exclaimed Sir Charles, pointing to a notice board that leant like a drunken flag over the broken paling which fringed the neglected garden.

"No; it is Mr. Salesby's peculiar way of informing strangers of the name of his house; he calls it 'The Corner.' Some allusion to the Derby course, I believe."

"Oh, I see; Tattenham Corner. Our friend is an original."

At that moment, as if to illustrate the fact, Mr. Salesby appeared at his own front door. He was a spare little man, who, if he had been younger, might well have been taken for a jockey out of place; he looked as if he had been "sweated down," and had suffered in health in consequence. His appearance was "horsey," from the straw in his mouth to the spurs on his old ill-kept top boots. He had just come in from his morning ride through the back door of his residence, which opened conveniently on the stable yard.

"Well, Master Lorry, how goes it?" he shouted, almost as loud as a view holloa. "Come in, and bring your friend with you."

As they obeyed the invitation, and walked up the well-worn gravel walk, the visitor took note of the desolate aspect of the house—the stains of weather it showed, the patched windows, and the blank spaces where others had long ago been built over to avoid the tax, and left so when it had been done away with.

"What! Sir Charles Walden is it?' exclaimed the host with pleased surprise as they drew nearer. "Welcome to 'The Corner.' You must be dry after a walk in this weather; have a glass of claret."

He pronounced the word—perhaps to modestly intimate the mildness of the vintage—as though it were monosyllabic.

"I would rather have a glass of ale," replied the other smiling. "I remember how good your tap used to be, though it is many years ago since I tasted it last."

"Aye; that was at the great election time, fifteen years ago. It was not my fault that you did not get in. What I said was, when people said things agen you, 'Let byegones be byegones.' Take a seat, Sir Charles."

He led them into a barely-furnished room,

the walls hung round with pictures of Derby winners, looking very much alike, and a portrait of the host on horseback, very unlike him, or at all events what he had since become. It was a spick and span model of mounted propriety, and suggested a M.F.H. considering whether he should accept the office of churchwarden. The handles of the bell-ropes were foxes' "pads;" upon the mantelpiece, stuck in cheap vases, as though they had been flowers, were foxes' brushes: above them, as though it had just bitten its way through the wall, was a fox's head. There was a litter of clay pipes, fragments of tobacco, and bills headed "accounts rendered" upon the table, which Mr. Salesby cleared away by the simple process of sweeping them on to the floor with his "crop," which he still held in his hand. "They may just as well lie there as anywhere else," he grinned, "so far as any chance of their being paid is concerned."

"Yes, the times are bad indeed for us who live by the land," observed Sir Charles sympathetically.

"They're deuced bad with *me*, at all events," replied the host, not without a touch of satire

and a use of the figure termed ellipsis, though he was unconscious of his obligation to it. He disliked the other's pretence of being in the same boat—"Impecuniosity"—with himself, but his sense of the duties of hospitality forbad his resenting it. He rang the bell, and on its being answered by a slatternly girl, exclaimed, "Yell, and glasses round;" then added, as she was leaving the room, "and tell your young missis to come down."

Lawrence sighed and looked out of the window, while Sir Charles fixed his attention on the portrait of their host.

"Aye, that's Stickaback," cried Mr. Salesby, —it was not from modesty that he attributed the interest of the picture to the horse, rather than to its rider, but simply that in his eyes the equine race was superior to the human—"the best timber jumper of his day, bar none. He'd ha' won the 'Liverpool' but for a cussed storm, which made the ground slippery."

"What great events hang on small causes," observed the baronet demurely.

"You may say that, for I lost four hundred pounds by his not keeping his legs—

but here's the yell; where's Miss Kitty, lass?"

"She's coming up the walk now," returned the handmaid.

Lawrence was already acquainted with the fact, and indeed had been making appealing but unmistakable signs to her to go back again. Sir Charles turned to the window and beheld, as it struck him at least one flower in the garden, which, for grace and beauty, it would have been difficult to match. Kitty Salesby was "tall and most divinely fair," but she looked her best when she moved. It has been said that only a few women know how to walk, and she had this art, which in her case was nature, to perfection. Every limb in her body was full of grace, every line a line of beauty. Her father went to the window and beckoned her in impatiently, and she replied with a nod of assent; but such a nod! The two gestures might have been taken as examples of the coarseness and refinement, of which the same sign-language is capable. Yet, strange to say, the girl was not very refined except in a physical sense. Her manner indeed was never awkward —she had no *mauvaise honte*—but there was an

absence of that delicate reserve about it which, when it is not affected, is the crown of maidenly grace. She was far from bold or forward; quite free from anything that could be called vulgarity; but her bringing up and surroundings, and above all the necessity for self-assertion in domestic matters, which circumstances had imposed upon her, had given to her for so young a girl an unusual air of independence. When her father introduced his guest to her with some touch of ostentation as Sir Charles Walden, of Hurlby Castle, she took his outstretched hand without the least sign of perturbation, and when Mr. Salesby added with a dry chuckle, "Master Lawrence, I think you know," she nodded to him familiarly without embarrassment.

Naturalness, so wholly unlooked for, was not likely to escape the baronet's observation, but so far from taking advantage of it, he continued his conversation with his host, leaving the two young people to themselves. His attention, however, seemed inclined to wander; and when the ale was being poured out by Kitty, very deftly and with a fine froth upon it, "you are not listening

to what I am telling you about Ganymede," said Mr. Salesby querulously.

"I beg your pardon," said Sir Charles, "but for the moment," here he bowed his thanks to the young lady, "I was rather thinking about Hebe."

The classical allusion was lost upon both father and daughter, but Kitty would have rightly understood that a compliment had been paid her, even had not Lawrence laughed and gently clapped his hands. It pleased the young fellow exceedingly that the beauty of his inamorata had awakened the admiration of his fastidious friend.

CHAPTER XV.

THE JUDICIOUSNESS OF FIFTY.

Though Lawrence knew so little of the world, he felt grateful to Sir Charles, inasmuch as notwithstanding the favourable impression Kitty had evidently made upon him, he scarcely addressed her throughout the visit, which lasted for some time, but left him the pleasing task of entertaining her. It was the kinder of his friend because he had felt that Mr. Salesby was boring his guest to extremity with his talk of the stable, though the other showed no more sign of his sufferings than an Indian at the stake. A few words, indeed, Sir Charles did say to Kitty to show that she was not neglected; he spoke of the beauty of the neighbourhood, and joined with her in her praise of the fir groves, which he drew from her were her favourite haunts, and inquired into her occupations, the simplicity of

which amused him; but on the whole he might be truly said to have sacrificed himself on the altar of friendship, and that too with such apparent willingness that his host wrung his hand, as he took his leave, informed him that he was "the best of company," and swore that if he ever stood for the county again he would work for him "like a navvy at a barrow."

"So I have found one source at least of your poetic inspiration, Master Lorry," observed Sir Charles, as they passed through the garden gate, not without difficulty, for it hung on a single hinge. "Lip apart, head aside, crowned with thy golden hair. Eh, well her hair *is* golden, and there is a very fine crop of it."

The young fellow's cheek crimsoned, but not with shame; his eyes shone with pride and pleasure.

"Now, is she not the most beautiful girl you ever beheld?" he exclaimed with enthusiasm.

"No; certainly not," was the unexpected rejoinder. "My experience in such matters is probably wider than yours, but apart from that, I hold your judgment—I mean, of course, only as regards comparison—faulty."

"You think my cousin Ruth more beautiful," said Lawrence quickly.

"Well, I had no intention of becoming so personal," answered the other gravely, "but that is certainly my opinion. However, Miss Kitty is beautiful enough for anybody. Are you engaged to her?"

The plainness of the question staggered the young fellow. "Well, no, not exactly," he answered hesitatingly, then very earnestly, "but I hope to be some day—it is the dream of my life. I hope to Heaven she will be my wife."

"That complicates matters, my friend, I mean as regards your future very much," returned the other gravely. "It is giving hostages to fortune indeed. A prisoner, wishing to escape from poverty and homelessness, you are thus hampering yourself with a fellow-prisoner, as it were, who can make no effort on her own behalf. Trenck himself would have shrunk from such an outlook."

"That is true, indeed. Do you suppose I do not understand it?" inquired Lawrence reproachfully.

"I think you underrate the difficulties of

such an enterprise. May I ask if the young lady is equally sanguine?"

"She is not," answered the young fellow curtly. "Her own unhappy circumstances, which you have seen for yourself, and for which there is no remedy, have depressed her. She has no hopes either for me or for herself."

"Yet she did not seem depressed."

"She was too proud to appear so in your presence; but her life, so full of sordid surroundings, is hateful to her. If I could only lift her out of the quagmire, and set her on firm ground! But what you are thinking, I know," he added bitterly, "is that we are more likely to sink together."

To this remark Sir Charles made no reply; and his silence was significant enough.

"And what is Mr. Salesby's view?"

"Well—it is not of much consequence, you will say—but it is favourable."

"He reflects that you have a grandfather."

"Yes. He thinks I may pull off the long odds, as he would express it, but I am well aware there is not the remotest chance of it. My Uncle Robert will stand between me and all

benefits from that quarter. I have nothing to hope for save from my pen."

"A sorry instrument, even though it be a steel one, to open that oyster, the world, with," replied the baronet. "Well, well, we must not be discouraged. You must pick out your *chefs-d'œuvre*—'prose and worse,' as Jerrold called them—and I will send them to an editor I know, who will at least give me his opinion about them."

"You are most kind," exclaimed Lawrence with effusion; then suddenly, "but I hope the opinion will be an honest one. I mean not merely to please me, or rather, to please you. That would be a cruel kindness."

The colour came into Sir Charles's face, and he was silent for a moment. Perhaps he had had some idea of bespeaking an encouraging verdict. "Well, my good fellow," he answered with a cheery smile, "it will signify nothing to you what the editor says if his opinion is unfavourable, for you will not believe one word of it. No young genius ever does. On the other hand, if he accepts your contributions he will pay you for them, which is better than all the criticism in the world."

"You do not really think that," said Lawrence doubtfully.

"I am putting myself in your place. I should think that if I were you. Indeed, I am not sure whether it is not so in the abstract absolutely. Of course, any critic worthy of the name recognises rubbish as worthless; but when there is merit how can he recognise *that* in a work in a single reading, as the man does who has spent weeks and months over it? It is true I am no guide to letters; but in a parallel case, that of our own nature, I am well convinced—notwithstanding all saws to the contrary—that we know ourselves far better than those who call themselves judges of character can know us. We have ten times as much interest in the matter, and a hundred times the data to begin with."

"That is a new view to me," said Lawrence. Indeed, very many of his companion's sentiments were new to him. The man himself was a study, and surprised him in many ways. His grace of manner and the kindness he exhibited towards himself were no doubt factors in his admiration, nor (though this counted far less with him) did

his great social position go for nothing; but what most attracted him was the originality and naturalness of the other's talk. He had only known one man—of a very different kind, however—whose individuality had similarly impressed him, his old tutor, Mr. Percy.

They got home in time for luncheon, at which only Miss Jane, Mrs. Merridew, and Ruth were present. The master of the house never put in an appearance at that time, and Mrs. Robert, overcome no doubt by her extraordinary exertions of the previous evening, was indisposed, and required the attentions of her devoted husband. Miss Jane herself at the conclusion of the meal went off, as she expressed it, to "look after" her sister-in-law, declining to accept Ruth's services which were offered for that purpose. She even gave Sir Charles to understand that when anyone was ill in the house, it was her hand that was always ready to smooth the pillow; this, as Lawrence informed him with some bluntness ("she would be much more likely," he said, "to smother them with the pillow") was not, however, the case. It was Ruth who was always the sick nurse; but on

this occasion Miss Jane had her reasons for leaving her niece at leisure; and the opportunity thus given to Sir Charles, he was not slow to take advantage of.

"I trust your aunt is not seriously indisposed," he said to her, in a tone that was capable of being translated in earnest or in jest; he knew the character of Mrs. Robert's invalidism, but wanted to discover whether Ruth was inclined to be plain with him or not.

"There is not much amiss with Mrs. Robert," answered the girl frankly; "I wish I could say as much for my other aunt."

"You mean your Aunt Jerry—that is, Mrs. Lock," added the baronet hastily, "I owe both you and her an apology, but the fact is Lawrence and I have become such friends that I have fallen into his way of speaking."

"He would be pleased to know it," she answered graciously, "and I am sure Aunt Jerry would not be displeased at your calling her by her familiar name; she is one of the kindest creatures on earth, as well as one of the most harmless, and she is in very delicate health, I regret to say."

"I am sorry for that. Lawrence, too, spoke of her to me with equal warmth."

"I am glad of that; it was good of him; that is, I mean," she continued, with a blush, "young men do not always take the trouble to perceive the merits of an old woman."

"Not so much as of a young one, at all events," observed Sir Charles smiling. To this Ruth made no reply. Was it possible, he wondered, that the girl was piqued at Lawrence's indifference to her, or was even aware of his affections being otherwise engaged? It was worth his while to discover this.

"We have been a long walk over your beautiful country," he resumed. "I had no idea that Hillsland had such attractions."

"The whole table-land above the village is glorious," she assented.

"And the village itself is so picturesque," he added. "Indeed, one house, at which we called, seemed a little too picturesque; not, indeed, from an artist's point of view, but a landlord's. It was my old friend, Mr. Salesby's, 'The Corner,' as he calls it."

"Ah, that is a sad business. The poor man, they say, is on the road to ruin, though, I fear, by his own fault. What makes the thing so pitiable is that he has a daughter."

"Yes, I saw her to-day: a very pretty girl."

"To my mind she is much more than that: a most graceful and charming girl."

"Do you really think her charming?"

"So far as looks go, yes; I have never seen her equal; but I scarcely know anything of her besides her looks. She feels her father's position —and indeed her own—I fancy very keenly, and that makes her disinclined for acquaintanceship. None of us see anything of her, poor thing!" Sir Charles thought of Lawrence's infatuation for the girl (for so it seemed to him) and could not restrain a smile. "You are thinking, perhaps," added Ruth, with a little blush, "that we have made no effort to be friendly; but, indeed, I have done what I could. She seems to resent any sympathy."

"I am sure you have done your best," said Sir Charles earnestly. "I was very far from thinking otherwise."

"She reminds me of Hillsland Beck, which you crossed on the moor to-day—

> "'With each cross and fall the prouder,
> Like a proud man growing poor.'"

"A pretty metaphor and a true one," observed Sir Charles, "but the lines are unfamiliar to me."

"This is not surprising," she answered smiling, "they were written by Lawrence."

"And on Miss Kate?" he inquired.

"Not that I am aware of," she answered, laughing this time outright. "He writes on most things, but I don't think he has yet immortalised either me or Miss Salesby."

"So far as my judgment goes," returned Sir Charles, without betraying his secret amusement at this proof of ignorance, "he writes very well. He is to give me some specimens of his genius to-day, and I have promised to do what I can to get them into print."

"That is kind of you indeed," she murmured earnestly. "If he could only get a little encouragement, poor fellow, he might do something for himself. I feel, though, alas, I know

nothing about such matters, that he has a great deal of talent."

"That is just my feeling, and also my state of ignorance," said the other gravely.

"But you are not ignorant; and you have power and influence. Oh, if you *could* help him to help himself! He is not happy here, at all."

"He ought to be," returned Sir Charles, with a little bow. She waved her hand as if to put away a compliment out of place; her look was serious and even sad.

"If you only knew his position here, you would think he had good cause to be unhappy. And then the alternative—that dreadful clerkship at Singapore, for which he is so unfitted, and the thought of which is hateful to him. If he could only maintain himself in England, how thankful I should be!"

"If I had not been interested in Lawrence before," said Sir Charles earnestly, "the knowledge that you feel so warmly for him would enlist my best endeavours." The colour rushed to the girl's cheeks. A less intelligent or a vainer man would have set her emotion down to his own account, but the baronet translated it

aright. Ruth had blushed, not at his willingness to serve her, but at the affection he had imputed to her for her cousin.

"She is in love with him," was his quick conclusion, "and he is not in love with her." It would have been easy to disenchant her by letting her understand that he was in love with somebody else; then her affection would be free to settle elsewhere. It would not be necessary for him to use any of those stratagems which we are told are fair in love and war; he had only to tell the simple truth. But this he hesitated to do, for the very reason that would have caused some men to take that course—because he himself regarded her with such tenderness. It could not, as yet at all events, be said that he was in love with Ruth; but it was not only her beauty that attracted him; her unselfishness, her frankness, her defiance of the domestic tyrants before whom poor Mrs. Merridew and Aunt Jerry crouched in fear, filled him with admiration. She might find out for herself—as indeed she would surely do—the true state of affairs, but he would not be the one to awaken her from "Love's young dream." A chivalrous resolve enough,

but at the same time he did not forget that the messenger of such ill-tidings would therein be far from recommending himself to her. The lover of fifty is said to be more vehement of purpose than he of twenty-five, but he is also more judicious in the manner of his wooing.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ERROR IN A TELEGRAM.

The noblest study of mankind may be man, but it is certainly the most difficult. The general character of his fellow-creatures may indeed be diagnosed by the observant student pretty accurately. He is but a tyro in the art if he cannot, on comparatively slight acquaintance, distinguish the honest man from the rogue. "Man," says a modern poet, "is not wicked and is not good; by no means as white as snow, but by no means as black as coal; he is black and white; piebald." This is the case, of course, with the majority, though some of us—and not a few—are blacker than any nigger; absolutely without conscience, or tenderness, or any white spot whatever—blackguards; but, as regards the piebald ones, though their general disposition may be understood, their particular weaknesses — or

worse—often remain unknown even to those who live under the same roof with them. The ex-Commissioner's character, for example, was read pretty accurately by his son, who had given great pains to the study of it; but there were schemes going on in that bald pate under the skull cap of which he knew nothing. And on the other hand, though the old gentleman knew his son to be not only self-seeking and unscrupulous, but (what was far more deplorable) somewhat risky in his method of gaining his ends, he had hardly a suspicion of the desperate recklessness of which he was capable; and though both suspected the other's weakness (because it was common to them), neither had any conception of its extent. They transacted business together—the old man's business—almost daily, but now and then it crossed Robert's mind that he did not possess his father's confidence; that something of importance was kept back from him. He himself professed to have no business; his wife's money sufficed for him until in fulness of time he should receive the inheritance due to him by birth, and earned by filial duty of late days; but even when in conference with his

father, Robert had of late shown himself *distrait* and somewhat neglectful of the matter in hand. "You are thinking of something else," complained the old gentleman, with irritation, as they sat in the study together, talking of leases and repairs; "what maggot have you got in your head now?"

"My wife is ill, sir."

"I never knew her otherwise," was the unsympathetic reply. "It is a great nuisance it should be so while Sir Charles is with us, since it leaves no one to do the honours." This was rather an unreasonable complaint, for, as we know, the speaker had no high opinion of the lady in question as a hostess, but the last thing the ex-Commissioner gave himself any concern about was consistency.

"Sir Charles gets on well enough," returned Mr. Robert with a sneer. "He seems to find an interest in Lawrence's society, which to me is inexplicable. The boy was conceited enough before, and this will turn his head."

"His head will be turned towards Singapore before the year's out," replied the other indifferently, "so that matters nothing. The

question of more consequence is, is Sir Charles interested in Ruth?"

"Yes: Jane is distinctly of opinion that he is. They talk together, she tells me, upon poetry and such like, which it seems is a good sign. If the girl had the right sort of wits, she could easily lure him, or at all events put him in a position where I could bring him to book."

"I don't understand you, Robert," exclaimed the old gentleman hotly. "That is not the way to speak of my son Cyril's—your eldest brother's —daughter. Do you suppose that I wish Ruth to figure in an action for breach of promise?"

"Well, it would never come to that, of course; but if Sir Charles inclines to play fast and loose with her, I think he should be made to pay for it; it would be only right—and also most particularly convenient."

The last words had probably some reference to what they had been talking of before, for the other answered irascibly enough indeed, but not contentiously ——

"At all events, see that our guest has his own way in this house. Though it may not chime in with your notions if he has taken a

fancy to Lawrence, don't put a spoke in the lad's wheel by giving Sir Charles a bad opinion of him; and don't let Mr. Arthur Grueby show his nose here again while Sir Charles is with us. He has *not* been here since, has he?" added the old gentleman sharply.

"No, sir; he has gone to the Derby, which, as you know, is run to-day."

"I know nothing about the Derby. Horse-racing is a low and demoralising pursuit. In India our Cheroot Sweepstakes — "

Here there was a knock at the door.

"A telegram for you, sir," said the servant, handing the yellow envelope to his master. The ex-Commissioner knitted his brows at the superscription—"Stratton, Hillsland;" he did not like his name and address to be thus abbreviated for the sake of three half-pence.

"This is a cursed piece of impertinence," he exclaimed, when he had possessed himself of the contents: "'Ganymede for ever—Grueby.' What the deuce does the blackguard mean?"

"I think the message must have been meant for me, sir," suggested Mr. Robert; but notwithstanding the mistake, and the wrath that it had

aroused in his father's mind, "the squire's" tone was cheerful, and even buoyant.

"But what does it *mean?* I say," exclaimed the old man savagely. "Who is Ganymede?"

"Well, I suppose it's the winner of the Derby. Grueby is a foolish fellow, who thinks everybody has the same tastes as himself, and so he telegraphs what he considers will be interesting information."

"I don't believe it. Grueby would not spend sixpence to please anybody. You told him to do it, sir."

"I may have done so," said Robert indifferently, "but if so it has escaped my recollection. It was very idiotic of him not to have addressed the thing more distinctly."

"Idiotic? He must have been drunk!" cried the old gentleman.

"It is rather early in the afternoon for *that*," said Mr. Robert smiling, but in his heart he thought it not impossible that the excitement of having "pulled off a good thing" might have been supplemented in his friend's case by a bottle of champagne at some other winner's expense.

"I don't like it," exclaimed the ex-Commissioner, in that judicial and condemnatory tone before which many a dark-hued native had trembled! "it looks to me as though there was some discreditable transaction in which you and he were both interested—gambling, sir."

"You display your usual acumen," observed Mr. Robert frankly, "though in a matter scarcely worth its exercise. If you will carry your mind back to the night when Mr. Grueby dined with us, you may remember that he talked of having a few crowns on Ganymede, of which he offered me a share. He seems to be almost out of his mind at the success of our little speculation. I believe I am the richer for it by *five* pounds."

"If that is all, and you have won," put in the old gentleman naïvely, "there is not much to be said; but you know how I abhor gambling of all kinds."

Mr. Robert nodded; he would like to have been able to say with confidence, "I know it," but he was not so sure about that matter as he wished to be. He had an uneasy suspicion that the governor "dabbled" in things that did not

always turn out Ganymedes. The rest of their interview was much more agreeable than at one time it had promised to be. Mr. Robert was more dutiful in his manner even than usual, and found more frequent occasions to admire his father's sagacity. He spoke of the pleasure Sir Charles had derived from his inspection of the ex-Commissioner's Indian treasures; "I can hardly get him to talk of anything else."

"Really now, indeed," said the old gentleman, emitting little purrs of satisfaction, that alternated with the hubble-bubble of his pipe. "Which do you think took his fancy most?"

"I think the tulwar of the Rajah of Bundlecumbad; the scabbard he described as a triumph of Eastern decoration."

"If I have a favourite relic of the gorgeous East it is that tulwar," murmured the old gentleman.

Still, when their talk was over, Mr. Robert was more glad than usual to get away; he did not look so cast down about his wife as he had done, and instead of going straight to her sick room, as might have been expected, he took up his hat and walked into the village. "Of course it's all

right," he muttered gaily to himself, "but I'll just look in at Salesby's and get the news confirmed."

It was not a small matter that could bring a smile that was not a sneering one into Robert Stratton's face, but it wore one now; it was not, it is true, of a very sunny nature, far less of that pleasant kind that evokes its fellow from whomsoever we foregather with, but it evinced at least a comfortable self-satisfaction, such as any man might wear who has enriched himself at somebody else's expense. It was not likely that he would find Mr. Richard Salesby in such high spirits, because he had always said that Ganymede was "not the horse for his money," but he was sure to have had a "wire" from Epsom, whether the news was bad or good.

As the squire drew near "The Corner," he perceived its proprietor leaning over the garden gate in talk with Lawrence. His brow grew dark in a moment; he hated to see grown men talking to the boy as if he were their equal, and even, as in this case, treating him with a certain consideration. Aware of this, and reciprocating the other's dislike of his society, Lawrence began to move away as the squire drew near.

"What are you flitting for, lad?" inquired Mr. Salesby.

"Oh, *we* don't want him," exclaimed Mr. Robert, who had just come within earshot, "let him go."

"Speak for yourself, squire, not for me," returned the other roughly. "Somebody else wants him here, if I don't. You speak to Master Lorry as if, instead of being your own kith and kin, he was your dog; he ain't your *pet* dog, that's certain." And the speaker laughed with that full appreciation of his *bon mot* that is felt by a man who very seldom makes one.

Lorry was not yet out of hearing, which did not tend to smooth the squire's temper; but it was obviously injudicious to quarrel with his sporting friend till he had furnished him with the information of which he was in search.

"I am glad to see you in a joking mood, Mr. Salesby, this afternoon. I was afraid, perhaps, that the news from Epsom might have cast you down a bit."

"Thank you, squire; I strive to stand up against it," returned the other with a wave of his hand, but even as he spoke he slipped and almost

belied his words by coming to the ground. Loosing his hold upon the gate to indulge in gesticulation had been an imprudence; for the fact was that Mr. Salesby was drunk. Mr. Robert perceived it without the regret that should have been aroused by such discovery; indeed, he was rather glad of it, because it corroborated his telegram. Mr. Salesby, as he knew, had never been a believer in Ganymede, and the tidings of that animal's victory must have been bad news to him. To "keep his spirits up" he had no doubt been "pouring spirits down."

"When did you get the wire?" inquired Mr. Robert, ignoring with a fine sense of delicacy the other's condition; he was not from a moral point of view exacting, and quite willing, if it had only left Mr. Salesby with sense enough to answer his questions, to forgive his peccadillo.

"Not half an hour ago," answered the other with some indistinctness. "Where's Sir Charles, where's Kitty, where's everybody? I want to tell 'em about it."

"Well, tell *me*," said the squire cheerfully.

Mr. Salesby fumbled in his breast pocket, and

after a considerably longer time than it had taken in transmission, produced his telegram.

"Let me read it!" cried Mr. Robert, with outstretched hand.

"No you don't," answered the other, drawing it back with a lurch that made the gate swing and him with it; "every gentleman gives a public reading of his own telegram, all others are—what's the word?"

"Imitations," suggested Mr. Robert.

"Not at all, sir. Much worse than that. All others are frau—frau—fraudulent. If *you* read it, for instance," said Mr. Salesby with a gleam of humour, "it would sure to be fraudulent. Now listen: silence in the pit, silence in the gal—— By-the-bye, where the deuce *is* the gal? Lawrence can't find her, *I* can't find her. Kit, Kit, Kit!" and here Mr. Salesby gave a really admirable imitation of one whose favourite cat has in youth strayed from his hearth, and who seeks to recover it by blandishments.

"Will you be kind enough to read the telegram?" observed the squire, with that unnatural calmness of tone which is the immediate herald of an outbreak of temper.

"Suttingly, sir. Tip, Tip, Tippitiwitchit. Devilish good horse, Tip, though with much too long a mane—I mean name. Tippity first; that's my horse. Salt Fish second, Parsnips next, which is just as it should be; and then that very overrated animal, as I always told you, Ganymede. The rest not placed."

"That's all lies, the whole of it," exclaimed the squire furiously. "Ganymede has won the race, I have a telegram from Grueby to say so."

"Let me look at it," cried Salesby, roused to consciousness and even intelligence by this amazing statement.

"There you see, it's clear enough," insisted Mr. Robert, 'Ganymede for ever.' That must mean that he has won. What else can it mean."

Mr. Salesby burst out laughing. "Well, it means that the passon's (parson's) drunk. Dreadful thing, drink, in a passon. What he meant to write was, 'Ganymede four,' for fourth he is, and no mistake about it, only his scrawl was so shaky that the telegraph clerk thought it was 'for ever.' There, come in and take a sup of whiskey," he added, with a touch of sympathy. "You look down in the mouth, squire."

CHAPTER XVII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

The poet tells us that "A sorrow's crown of sorrows is remembering happier things," but even a bard's experience is limited; if he had been connected with the turf he would probably have placed the losing of a huge sum of money, when he thought he had "pulled off" a still larger one, at the summit of human woes. This was precisely what had happened to Mr. Robert Stratton. He had stood to win £20,000 on Ganymede (for, unlike his confederate, Mr. Grueby, he didn't bet in half-crowns), and fondly imagined he had done it; whereas Ganymede had in fact lost him £5,000. Only one person in the world had the least suspicion of the magnitude of his "transactions" in horse-flesh, but when he refused Mr. Salesby's offer of liquid refreshment, and strode away with something

very like a curse, that gentleman's suspicions were excited. A man must be very hard hit, indeed, he thought, to turn his back upon old whiskey; a thing he had never done himself under the most untoward circumstances. He might have invoked his bottle in (almost) the same words as the lover of music addressed to his pianoforte:—

> "Dear friend, whom grave or gay we seek,
> Heaven-holding shrine;
> I pull thy cork and hear it squeak,
> And peace is mine.
> No fairy casket full of bliss
> Outvalues thee,
> Love only wakened with a kiss
> More sweet may be."

As he leant over his garden gate and watched the squire's retreating form, this rustic moralist shook his head; he had won a good stake on Tippitiwitchit, and could afford to pity a fellow-creature. Besides his winnings, Mr. Salesby had another subject for satisfaction that morning; not, indeed, a very solid one, but which had been at all events "an excuse for a glass." He dwelt upon it now in a dreamy, not to say a

boozy way, and winked and winked again over it with extraordinary sagacity; and this too led his cheerful mind to pity. "Poor Lorry, what a dog's life the squire leads him! He'll be harder upon him than ever, now that he has to fork out this pot of money. It is not two-and-sixpence that he has lost this time, I'll bet a penny. The lad's chance of getting anything out of that oriental old scarecrow (thus he spoke of the ex-High Commissioner) will be next to nothing. And I don't envy the passon neither when he comes back and the squire has a word to say to him about that telegram, 'Ganymede for ever;' Grueby will never beat that if he lives to be a hundred." And Mr. Salesby gave himself up to such uncontrollable merriment as threatened to tear the garden gate from its solitary hinge.

The circumstance in question affected Mr. Robert Stratton in a very different manner. He shook, but certainly not with mirth, and, though Mr. Grueby was more particularly in his thoughts, he swore at large. His loss, great as it was, had come upon the back of other losses, which he had fondly hoped his venture upon

Ganymede would have recouped, nor had they been half-crown losses, as Mr. Salesby had called them. He could not settle this debt of honour without appealing for help to his father or to his wife, who were equally ignorant of his speculations. The ex-Commissioner was not one who parted with his money very readily, even for the best of objects; if his purse was long his temper was short. As for Mrs. Robert, her money had been settled on her and her children by a prudent father, though it would revert to her husband in case of her dying childless. The squire, as Mr. Salesby would have expressed it, was "in a hole," and he could see but one way out of it, such as only desperation could suggest. It was a wicked way, and also exceedingly dangerous. As he walked on with rapid but aimless steps, slashing the weeds and ferns with his walking-stick, as if he were cutting off men's heads, he came upon Lawrence, sitting on a stile with a pipe in his mouth, and looking very glum.

"What are you doing there, you idle young devil?" he inquired stormfully.

"Smoking!"

"If you give me any of your infernal impudence I'll cut your liver out," cried the squire, raising his stick.

Lawrence thrust his hand into his pocket, pulled out an enormous clasp-knife, and opened it with a click. It was plain that he was prepared for "reciprocity" in livers, and that Uncle Robert would come under the "most-favoured nation" clause.

"What is that for?" inquired the squire; not that he cared, but because, notwithstanding his fury, he shrank from precipitating matters.

"Whittling," replied Lawrence, and he produced a hunch of bread and cheese.

The witticism was thrown away upon the other, but not the coolness with which it was uttered. He was no coward, but it had suddenly struck him that the present was a very ill-chosen time for a row with his younger relative, however successful might be the issue. Such violence should not go unpunished, but vengeance is a dish that can be eaten cold.

"Where is Sir Charles?" he inquired curtly.

"I don't know."

"But it is your business to know, sir; as I

have already told you, you are placed at his disposal to make his stay agreeable to him."

"I am not in his service, nor in yours," returned Lawrence coldly; "as a matter of fact, however, when I went to look for him, as usual, this afternoon, I found he had gone out. I suppose over the hill."

The squire nodded, by no means affably, but to his nephew he seldom condescended to nod, and took the direction indicated. He had only a vague purpose in so doing; but in the desperation of his loss it had occurred to him that the baronet might lend him money; at all events he had the power to do so, which was something; £5,000 to him was like five-thousand pence to another man; nevertheless he had a suspicion that the other did not like him, and things were hardly so advanced between Ruth and their visitor to incline him to do him so great a favour on the ground of future relationship. He walked for miles upon the moorland without meeting with anyone; face to face only with his dark and dismal thoughts. The song of the lark, the coo of the dove, the wave-like murmur of the pines wooed his ear in vain; in vain the

odorous air swept his frowning brow; in vain the landscape in its fresh summer garb stretched before his heated eyes. At last, when after a long circuit he had turned towards home, his far-sweeping glance fell on the man he sought; he was a great way off, close, indeed, to Hillsland, but he knew it was Sir Charles by his light summer suit, and Ruth was with him. Even while he gazed the pair had entered the last pine-grove beneath which lay the village. He could hardly have come up with them before they reached home, even if he had tried; but he had now no desire to do so; he had indeed lost the opportunity for which he sought, but his chance in the future was greatly bettered. Since Ruth and Sir Charles were walking alone together it was plain that their courtship had got on apace. He was glad that he had not thrashed Lawrence, for since the baronet had taken that inexplicable liking to the boy it would probably have proved an obstacle to the loan he had in view. What convinced him that the love affair was ripening was that when he next caught sight of Sir Charles he was walking alone towards the hall; Ruth, without doubt,

had parted from him on the way to avoid any comment that might have been made upon their coming home together. Such delicacy of feeling was hardly in Mr. Robert's way, but he knew how to appreciate it in others. If the happiness of his fellow-creatures could not be said to be his aim in life, he was not one to "spoil sport" when the game was being driven into his own net.

Before Sir Charles reached home he overtook his young friend strolling in the same direction.

"Hullo, my lad," he exclaimed cheerily, "you look as if the rhymes didn't come luckily this morning. What's the matter?"

"Nothing; if I am dull it was because I missed your companionship. I found you had left the house when I looked into your sitting-room this afternoon as usual."

"Yes, I had a headache, and knowing you were hard at work with your writing, I thought I would take a walk over the hill. Where have *you* been? But there, I need not ask."

"If you mean with Kitty, you are mistaken," answered Lawrence with a blush. "I did call at 'The Corner,' but as it happened she was out;

gone into the vale, her father said, about some poultry. He is in high feather this morning because he had won on the Derby."

"So Miss Kate may be an heiress after all, eh?"

Lawrence shook his head, the subject was too tender for a jest.

"I had meant to tell her how kind and helpful you had been to me," he said.

"You had better wait for that until something has come of my endeavours," observed Sir Charles. "I ought to have heard from our editor before this; he has had plenty of time to read the MSS. I sent him."

"Perhaps they have cast him into a deep sleep," murmured Lawrence ruefully.

"One good turn deserves another, in that case he ought to send *you* 'a refresher;' come, I should like to know what are your expectations."

"Expectations? Indeed, I have none, only hopes. A five-pound note would satisfy my highest aspirations."

They had entered the garden, and Sir Charles was making for a summer-house, which after his

long walk seemed a convenient spot to pursue their conversation.

"That is a very modest figure," he said, "at which to appraise such a mass of MS. If it comes to no more than that I should recommend your giving up literature as a bad job, and appealing to the old Mummy——"

As he said the words Sir Charles found himself opposite Miss Jane, who, sitting in the arbour with an improving book on her lap, had most certainly overheard them.

"I must really ask your pardon," he continued with his sweetest smile, "for applying such an epithet as I have just used to any relative of yours; but my young friend here so often calls Mrs. Merridew 'the Mummy' (meaning his mamma), or even 'the old Mummy,' that when talking with him I have—quite inexcusably—fallen into the way of it."

It was "magnificent," and if not exactly the truth, and indeed *splendide mendax* would have been a fit quotation for it—it had some *soupçon* of truth about it. Lawrence did sometimes call his mother "the Mummy" for love and euphony, but as an example of presence of mind, on the

very verge of a catastrophe, Sir Charles's *coup* was perfection, and in that light alone it struck Lawrence.

He not only recognised the fact that Miss Jane would never have forgiven his friend for speaking of her father so disrespectfully, but that it would have opened her eyes to the alliance established between himself and the baronet against the Hall authorities. His gratitude and sense of relief, therefore, when he saw his aunt's grim face relax—for the familiarity taken, as she supposed, with her sister, by no means displeased her—and the puckers of her mouth form themselves into its ordinary wintry smile, were overwhelming. It did not occur to him at the time that such exceeding readiness of defence must have owed something to a habit of duplicity.

If Mr. Robert had been by and heard the baronet go on to ask after Miss Ruth, as if he knew nothing of what had been that young lady's movements for the afternoon, he would have formed a different impression of him. It was no doubt a praiseworthy satisfaction that Sir Charles took to hoodwinking Aunt Jane, but he certainly accomplished it with admirable skill. Even the

severe Calvinistic volume which had formed the subject of her outdoor studies, and of which she frankly expressed her conviction that it was not much in Sir Charles's way, came in for its share of eulogy. A theological discussion, in which he took care not to be the victor, brought down the curtain, save for a tag, spoken by the vanquished to his companion, after he had left the lady's presence, "That woman, my dear Lawrence, has made a religion for herself out of the worst parts of Christianity."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HONORARIUM.

"I HAVE got something for you which came by post this evening," said Sir Charles to Lawrence, as he took his seat and a cigar in the latter's room that night.

"Something from Mr. Latham?" inquired the boy eagerly; his face was flushed with excitement, his hand trembled as he poured out his friend's coffee for him; Mr. Latham was the London editor with whom the other had been in correspondence on his behalf.

"Yes, he sent you this," and he tossed a sealed envelope across to him.

"A letter; that is most kind of him."

"No; I wish it was, and that he had sent me the other thing. He has written me a letter as long as my arm."

"Oh, Sir Charles, this is too much!"

Lawrence was holding in his hand what had certainly never been there before, a ten-pound note. His eyes were full of wonder and gratitude and joy. It was the first money he had ever earned, which of itself is bliss; but he also beheld in it the promise of future fortune; the means of livelihood assured; and with it happiness and hope and Kitty. That almost transparent piece of paper with its delicate water-mark and cabalistic figures, was like the gift of some good magician in a fairy tale which endowed its possessor with all the wishes he longs for. It was the happiest moment of the young fellow's life.

Sir Charles regarded him with a humorous smile.

"Too much!" he echoed smilingly. "That's a remarkable observation for a contributor to make upon a *honorarium*. It's a lucky thing that Latham can't hear it. He would not be likely if he did to make such an error again, nor —on the other hand—is it probable that you will give him a second chance. 'Only this?' is the remark you will make next time, and 'Not enough!' the next. The appetite of the literary aspirant grows by what it feeds on. What seems

ample to-day is insufficient to-morrow. I look forward with pleasure to the epoch of your dissatisfaction, which is as sure to come as daybreak."

"At all events, Sir Charles, I shall always be grateful for *this*," returned the lad with emotion, "first to you and then to Mr. Latham."

"There is no reason for gratitude to either of us, my dear boy," answered the other drily. "To be sure I might insist upon a commission—and perhaps I may—but otherwise I am simply the intermediary; and as for Latham, so far as he is concerned, the affair is a mere matter of business. We should never waste what are called 'our better feelings,' but reserve them for some occasion worthy of them, and which their exhibition is calculated to improve."

Under other circumstances this cynicism of his companion would have amused the lad, but he could think of little else than the good fortune that had befallen him.

"Did Mr. Latham write anything to you about my—the—what you were good enough to send him?"

"Your MSS.? Why, of course he did. You've got the pith of the matter *there*. But

if you care to hear his criticisms—they are not all mignonette and sweetbriar, however——"

"To me they would be priceless," interrupted the young fellow.

"Well, they are so in one sense, no doubt; it's advice gratis. I'll read you what he says with pleasure."

"'*Dear Walden,—You must indeed be almost bored to death.*' Oh, that's nothing; '*I never knew literature to be in your line before.*' Oh, that's nothing. '*To find you interesting yourself about other people.*' Confound his impudence, where does he begin about the MSS.; oh, here it is. '*Your young friend's best things are his poems; which at first sight, considering his needs, would seem to be unfortunate; but it is not really so; for out of the young poet almost always grows the good prose writer. In the pictures called "In the Train," that of the "Mother and Middy" is capital.*' I am ashamed to say I forget it, Lawrence. Repeat, recite."

With a blush of modesty the boy quoted his poem:—

"'A widowed mother with her boy;
One that parts with her last joy

With steady hand and tearless eye,
And e'en finds speech for her "good-bye."
Grief and she are too old friends,
For least mistrust of the good ends
To which all trials, God-sent, tends.
By the voice that seems as though
Musicless it could not flow,
By the grace that doth appear
Still about her silvering hair,
By the fingers delicate,
Wealth or Ease was once her Mate,
By the weeds so worn and coarse
Theirs has been a long divorce.' "

"That's good; I remember the description of the boy," interposed Sir Charles, a little hastily. He was afraid of being bored, and still more afraid of showing it. "He was a good plucked one, just what a middy should be. Now let's hear the conclusion."

"' Boy and mother of that race
Meeting peril face to face,
Firm to friends and firm to foes,
On whose cheek nor comes nor goes
For shame nor fear, the blood-red rose,
Calm of eye and clear of head
English born and English bred.' "

"'Pon my life that ought to bring down the

house, Lawrence, or at all events the gallery. You deserve a pension for patriotic song, like Dibden."

As a general rule young poets (and also old ones) do not like being chaffed about their Muse, but there are different ways of doing it, and that of Sir Charles was a very pleasant way. Lawrence well understood that it was solely for his own sake, and not at all for any pleasure derived from his verses that Sir Charles was so patient a listener, and yet he was grateful to him, which showed him to be, if not a poet, something more.

"'*What I like next best,*' says Latham, '*is your young friend's description of the choice of a profession. The "Merchant" is good, and the "Yeoman" is good, but the "Soldier" is best of all.*' How does it run, my lad?"

"'Merrily clash the cymbals twain
With an exultant note,
Stirring sounds doth the trumpet rain
Adown its brazen throat;
Freshly flieth the pennant fair
From the good lance's head,
The stirrup's clank is blythe to hear,
Blythe is the charger's tread;

Fierce and clear doth the scabbard ring,
With the sharp sword for guest,
But the whirl of the downward swing
Of that blue blade is best;
And the tramp of a thousand steeds
In thunder and in cloud,
When the earth is shaken and bleeds,
Maketh a man's heart proud;
More proud than words ever said,
Aye, than songs ever sung,
And proudest the hearts fever fed,
Of the brave and the young.'"

"Now, that has go in it," exclaimed Sir Charles. "What a strange thing it is that one fellow whose heart is in Grub Street should write like that, and another should feel it. Set old Latham on a charger and he would fall off; he has never had a more deadly weapon in his hand than an umbrella; yet he writes of that poem justly enough: '*It stirs one's blood. It has something of the old ballad ring about it* (*those without an e*), *and is very refreshing after the triolets and artificialities of the modern Muse. It gives me great hopes of him.*' Luckily for you, my dear fellow, Latham is old-fashioned.

'A Pagan suckled on a creed outworn;'

he believes in Nature. Your 'Spring Time' has 'fetched' him. It has even fetched me, so that I remember the opening lines of it.

> "'Summer's coming, Winter's going,
> Sun has set the stream a-flowing,
> Through our windows ere we're waking
> Out from nests of this month's making,
> Come the rooks' caws without number,
> Preaching Work's more sweet than Slumber.
> From the bare branch just set swinging
> By the weight of his up-springing,
> Trills the song bird, "I'm in Clover!
> Spring's begun and Winter's over,
> No more blowing, no more snowing,
> Fruit's a budding, Wheat's a growing.'

"It is curious how spring revives the oldest of us, *gives* a spring to even the most worn-out machine. When Cicero tells us that there is no man so old but thinks that he will live a year, it is the spring that makes him think so. I dare-say you conclude that my old bones are dry."

"Indeed," continued Lawrence confusedly, "such an idea never entered into my mind."

"That's because you never thought about it; compared with you, no doubt I seem a centenarian. Well, they're *not* dry."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE INDIAN SUMMER.

At the time Lawrence saw no reason for those last observations of Sir Charles. They embarrassed him, and moreover he wanted to hear more of what Mr. Latham had written. He knew that Sir Charles was not fishing for compliments; that was not at all his way. There was a cynical smile upon his lip that puzzled him. What *did* he mean? A sudden thought flashed upon his mind. Sir Charles was alluding to a tenderness, which, notwithstanding the difference in their years, he entertained for Ruth. Perhaps he wished to break this news to him. This idea did not please Lawrence. The young always object to any amativeness in the old; such resuscitations are displeasing to them. They believe in the spring and the summer, but not in the Indian summer. Paterfamilias should be

content to "go a-wooing in his boys," and not attempt those adventures in his own person. It is not decorous in him, and it is greedy. "He has had his whack," as it is vulgarly termed, and should be satisfied with retrospection.

These were merely general considerations, and would not perhaps have much affected Lawrence, in Sir Charles's case; the baronet, though certainly advanced in years, was not at all like an old fogey; it would have been permissible to him, or at all events excusable, in his young friend's view, to have contemplated matrimony with some unknown damsel, however young, but he did not like the notion of his aspiring to the hand of Ruth. No suspicion of the kind had ever entered into the lad's head; he had not, of course, been made a confidante of the hopes entertained by the authorities of the Hall in that direction, and it struck him now with a sense of sacrilege. Of course, he might be mistaken about the matter altogether; it was the baronet's look and manner rather than his words that had awakened his apprehensions, but they were awakened. He seemed, somehow, to say to him, "However surprised you may be, my

young friend, at such tender sentiments in a centenarian, still I entertain them." He was not a centenarian, of course, but he was old enough to be Ruth's grandfather, and the idea was not only offensive to him but repulsive, and even personally repulsive. It had surely no right to be so. What had he got to do with it, whose love was pledged—though the pledge had been unratified by the other side—to another? Hundreds of young girls married their elders every year, in preference to their contemporaries, for rank, or at all events for sufficient reasons.

Age, it is said, is grasping and selfish; but so is youth. In Lawrence's case, his feelings could only be compared with those of the dog in the manger. He did not want Ruth for himself. How could he, when he had fixed his affections elsewhere? Yet he resented the possibility of this man's wanting her for *himself*. It was from no thought of her being changed towards him in case she became Lady Walden: no thought of his losing her affection, her solicitude, such as a man feels when his friend marries. It was something far deeper and stronger than that. It is understood, or at all events taken

for granted, that a man cannot be in love with two women at the same time—a theory, however, that does not obtain among Eastern nations —and, therefore, a lover has no right to be jealous about more than one object. Yet what Lawrence experienced as regarded Ruth and this possible suitor of hers was, if not jealousy, some feeling extremely like it.

"Well," continued Sir Charles, "after praising your poems in this liberal manner, Latham, of course, goes on to say (as I forewarned you) that from a commercial point of view they are not worth twopence."

"Not *tup*pence," ejaculated Lawrence sadly, "with stress on the first syllable."

"Well, he writes it twopence, but that's what he means. '*If your protégé*' (forgive me, that is Latham's unpleasant way of putting it) '*wants to get salt for his porridge he must give up verse-making, which takes up valuable time* (*even if one has a rhyming dictionary*), *and stick to prose. There are only three men in England at this moment who earn enough money by poetry to live on it, and Mr. Merridew is not at all likely to make the fourth. His sketch of Hills-*

land, with its mixed population of agriculturists and miners, is very good, and I shall be glad to print it in the magazine.' Latham always speaks of his periodical as if there was but one in the world; it is never 'my magazine' which would imply that there were others, but '*the magazine.*' Keep that in your mind in all your communications with him, or your connection will be but short-lived. '*The story you send me is also good, but not good enough. This is only to be expected in so young an author, without experience of life, for which no imagination can be a substitute; yet from this very MS. I gather great hopes of him. It is flippant and shallow enough, but he has wit and a very good style of his own. I should not mind seeing the little story again*—i.e., *an improved edition of it. It is a pity he lives in the country; an old literary hand may do so, and write from recollection, but it does not do for a young writer. You confess yourself, my dear Walden, that you are becoming a vegetable, and you were animal enough——*'

"Oh, that's all rubbish," interjected Sir Charles hastily; "old Latham is a Cockney born and bred."

"Still, how I should like to live in London," sighed Lawrence, "if it was but in a garret."

"Dick Whittington, eh, with your cat? Perhaps your ambition goes a little further, but that would come more expensive."

"I *know*," said Lawrence pathetically.

"I envy you even your dreams," replied the other gently; "My poor boy, my poor boy!" He rose and walked to the window, and gazed out on the glorious landscape bathed in moonlight. A good impulse, or at all events a generous one, was stirring within him. He had half a mind to play the part of a "little Providence" with his interesting young friend. But would it, after all, be for his advantage? There was at least one very good reason (known to himself only) why it should not be so; and there was also an objection to such a course—a strong if not a good objection—upon his own account. The mere outlay that would be necessary, to do Sir Charles justice, never entered his mind; he was always liberal, nay lavish, in matters of expenditure, if they consorted with his own humour; if otherwise he could be granite. The impulse passed away. "Well," he said, "there

is little more in our friend's letter that would interest you, except the enclosure; that is the price of the village sketch."

"A magnificent honorarium for such a trifle, indeed," observed Lawrence.

"I am glad it pleases you, though, as I have said before, any sense of obligation you may be feeling on that score will soon wear off. The literary mind—notwithstanding the reams of balderdash that have been written about it—is as practical as any other; Shakespeare was no more indifferent to remuneration than Bacon, though he was a much more honest fellow. The labourer is worthy of his hire, and even in the field of letters is aware of it. The gate of that field is now open to you."

"Yes, and I shall never forget who opened it," said Lawrence gently.

"It is kind of you to say so; perhaps a day may come when you may have need to recall the fact to excuse something amiss, or that seems amiss, on my part. It is only for that reason that I would bid you remember it."

He is certainly referring to Ruth, thought Lawrence, but this time without resentment; he

could not just now mix up resentful feelings with the gratitude and joy that filled his heart. Still, as Sir Charles had said, the literary mind is practical. Lawrence had no doubts of his friend, was without the least suspicion of the impulsiveness of his character, but fortunately for himself, had the instinct to strike while the iron was hot.

"There would be no harm, I suppose, in my putting myself in direct communication with Mr. Latham, now that you have broken the ice for me."

"That is a better metaphor than you have any idea of," returned the other laughing, "for Latham is not a gushing editor. You must not expect him to write to you so encouragingly as he writes *of* you to me. He looks upon the contributor, though necessary to him, as a necessary evil, just as the barrister regards the solicitor; and though he can be civil enough, no doubt, to the well-known author, he is frigid to the volunteer."

"I can now understand how much your friendship weighed with him," said Lawrence, "since what has happened so far exceeds my

own expectations; but if it was only to save you further trouble, I should like to be in personal communication with him. May I say that you have read to me what he has been so good as to say about my——"

"Works," exclaimed Sir Charles, filling up the hiatus of modest hesitation; "'the works of Mr. Lawrence Merridew, the well-known novelist, will appear in monthly volumes at five shillings; a few large paper copies will be issued at one guinea;' I hope I shall live to see it."

"I am afraid you will have passed the ordinary limits of human life before that happens," said Lawrence with a sigh.

"That observation is not complimentary to either of us," returned the baronet drily. It really seemed as if the subject of age was an unwelcome one to him. Of course, Lawrence knew that it was so even with otherwise sensible men; but Sir Charles had seemed to him so superior to all such weaknesses.

There was a long pause.

"I am sorry to hear that you have a second invalid in the house," said Sir Charles, after a

time. "Miss Ruth tells me that Mrs. Lock is seriously indisposed."

"Yes; poor Aunt Jerry, I fear, is a great deal worse than Mrs. Robert," said Lawrence, "though not half so much fuss is made about her. Except my mother and Ruth, everybody takes her illness very coolly. It is one of the disadvantages of not being an heiress."

"And yet Mrs. Lock was very well off at one time," observed Sir Charles.

"So I have heard; but she has nothing now. If Uncle Robert thinks of her at all, he is probably calculating how cheaply she can be buried."

"It seems to me you are what an emotional philosopher has described as 'a good hater,' Master Lawrence."

"So would you be, if you were in my place," answered Lawrence.

"I suppose so," returned the other smiling. It was difficult, perhaps impossible, for him to picture himself in his companion's position; though in some respects equals, they were almost at the extreme ends of the social chain.

Though Lawrence resented the indifference

of his relatives to Aunt Jerry's indisposition, he himself regarded it with philosophy. There was not only no sympathy between them, but he had a suspicion that he was not a favourite with the old lady.

As regarded the feelings of his fellow-creatures, he was as sensitive to heat and cold as a thermometer; and if he could have been present at a little scene that was going on at that very moment only a few doors from his own room he would have had his views on the matter in question corroborated.

CHAPTER XX.

AUNT JERRY.

In a bedroom of ample proportions, but poorly furnished, lay an old woman on what, to judge by the white and weary face, the pinched features, the attenuated frame, and the voice that hardly rose to whisper pitch, should have been her deathbed; but her cavernous eyes had lustre in them still, and though her speech was low, it was sustained, and had none of those gasps and blanks in it that herald the eternal silence. Aunt Jerry was ill, no doubt, but, as her brother had cheerfully remarked to her when speaking of the fact, she was "worth a couple of dead 'uns yet." The observation, no doubt intended as a tonic, had effected no improvement in her condition, but there was some truth in it. Why, being so worn and weak, and having no solid reason so far as any

enjoyment of it was concerned to cling to life, she should have still continued to do so, was a question that might have been asked years ago; but now so very ill had Aunt Jerry got to look that it had become importunate. It even occurred to her tender-hearted niece, Ruth Stratton, as she leant over her patient's grey head and smoothed her pillow, and rubbed her fevered forehead with eau de Cologne. How can this Damocles' sword, which almost visibly hangs over this unhappy woman, have for her anything of menace? Perhaps it has not; but on the other hand she has no desire to die. She has just told the doctor so, who has replied "quite right" in a very encouraging manner, and has since informed Miss Jane of the circumstance as reflecting credit upon the family: "that inherent determination of the Strattons which she shares with the rest of you," he had said, "will keep her alive, madam—well —for some days."

"I hope so, indeed," replied Miss Jane, with genuine feeling and regret that the report had not been even more favourable, since "if anything happened" to Aunt Jerry—such

influences have the slightest causes upon affairs of real moment—it would be necessary for their guest to leave the Hall, just as everything between himself and Ruth seemed going on so nicely. But this consideration did not so much as enter into the mind of Ruth herself, which was entirely taken up with the care and comfort of her patient. These two presented a striking contrast: the one, prematurely old, the bitter cup of life drained almost to the dregs, waiting but by no means wishing for death; the other glorious in health and youth and beauty, and attired in some diaphanous garb (for she had come straight from the drawing-room) that to the more masculine eye made her resemble a ministering angel.

"Ruth," said the old lady, "this must not be."

"What must not be, Aunt Jerry?"

"Your coming here in your beautiful clothes every night to nurse a poor old woman like me. Your uncle doesn't like it, your Aunt Jane doesn't like it. It's a waste."

"A waste?"

"Well, of course, it's a waste" (this with

some irritation). "There is nothing to be gained by it. I wish there was, oh, deary me (her favourite expression), how I wish there was. I wish I could make you rich; rich as you deserve, then you would have millions. And, what is worse, you are losing your opportunities. This is the third night you have left the drawing-room before the proper time to come and look after me. This has been remarked upon. It is not hospitable."

"Hospitable? I don't understand you, Aunt Jerry."

"That is what they complain of. You do not, Jane tells me, appreciate your position. Ruth, dear Ruth, my darling, there is now a chance for you to escape from this dreadful place. Look at me. Do you wish your life to be like mine? To be a dependent all your life upon bounty grudged. Your grandfather will leave you nothing, Robert will take care of that. At present you have your beauty; when that is gone all will be gone. To be old and ugly, poor and friendless (for *you* will have no Ruth to love you), is a terrible fate. He does not like your running away every night,

Jane tells me, before he has done talking with you. There is no sort of excuse for it, she says, which is very true. It is not hospitable."

"Are you speaking of Sir Charles Walden," exclaimed Ruth, with a sudden flush. "What is it to him whether I go or stay?"

"Much, my darling, much; but oh, so very much more to you," answered the old woman. "It is you that I am thinking of. I care nothing about him at all."

"Nor I," answered the girl coldly. "No, I will not say that because he has been kind to Lawrence," she added hastily; "but he is nothing to me, nor can ever be in the way you mean."

"Ah, that is what I feared; that is worse than all; you only like him because he has been kind to Lawrence."

"Why should I like him for any other reason?"

"Because love begets love, and he loves *you*. Yes he does, Ruth, in his own fashion, though you shake your head. I am old and stupid, but I can see that. There is a light in his face when you are present that is not there at other

times. He is not young, it is true, not a boy like Lawrence, but neither will he change like a boy. There is the way out of all your difficulties. *Your* love will come when you are married to him: it does come so sometimes; it does, indeed!"

"My dear Aunt Jerry, this is idle talk," answered Ruth gravely; "if you were Aunt Jane I should say it was wicked talk. I will not listen to it. So far from it making me like the person you have in your mind, it will set me against him; I shall not even be grateful to him for what he has done for Lawrence."

"I wish you would not think of Lawrence so much, my darling."

"Why not?" answered the girl vehemently; "who else is there to think of him, except indeed his poor mother. I know no one—not even yourself—who has been so systematically ill-treated; so insulted, so wronged. Why should I not pity him?"

Aunt Jerry was silent; not for want of something to say, but from the reflection, would it be wise to say it? She was not an intelligent person, but she had instincts—delicate thoughts

even—that are often wanting to much cleverer people. Her view of human nature had been extremely limited, but she understood those she loved. Her feelings (a thing which is getting rare with some of her sex) were essentially womanly; she shrank from inflicting pain, even though (as with the surgeon's knife) it was for the good of the sufferer. At last she said, "All you say is very true, my darling, but Lawrence is not worthy of you."

The girl rose from her chair, with a white face. "You are ill, Aunt Jerry; you do not knew what you are saying; or you are jealous of poor Lawrence."

"I? Jealous?" answered the other pathetically. "Well, perhaps I am, but it is not on my own account."

"Lawrence not worthy?" continued Ruth. "Who under this roof can be a judge of that? He is a head and shoulders above everybody. That will be acknowledged some day, when the creatures who persecute him have gone to their unhonoured graves. You do not understand his nature; you must forgive my saying you are incapable of it."

"I know I am a stupid ignorant old woman," answered Aunt Jerry humbly; "I know that your cousin has thoughts too high for me; but the cleverest are not always the best, nor even the wisest; they make great mistakes, my dear, fatal mistakes, sometimes."

"They are human, if you mean that, of course."

"Yes, that is it; poor humanity; I am not blaming poor Lawrence, mind; and besides, he is but a boy. How should a boy know copper from gold. It shines, it sparkles, and that is enough for him."

"I don't know to what you are alluding, Aunt Jerry—not that it matters, however." It might not matter, but the speaker was white to the lips. Her hands went up to her bosom, and stayed there, as if to suppress some inward passion. "If you have anything to say against my cousin—if you, too, wish to add your voice to those which cry out against the innocent—say it. Not worthy? Why is he not worthy?"

"I said he was not worthy of *you*, my darling," answered the old lady in a frightened voice. "Nor is he? Nobody is."

Ruth threw out her disengaged arm with a contemptuous gesture, as though she would wave away this empty compliment. "You said more, Aunt Jerry. Something about gold and copper. What did you mean?"

"I mean—it may not be true, of course, but you ought to know if it is true. It has come to my ears that Lawrence is paying court to Kate Salesby."

"It is false," exclaimed Ruth. "The talk of the servants' hall. You ought to be ashamed to repeat it." Then with sudden calmness, "And if it is true, what right have you, what right has anyone to make it a charge against him? You are not his keeper. He is his own master. Why should not Lawrence——"

She dropped into the arm-chair and clung to it with both her hands. "Have you anything more to say," she added as though with a last effort of speech, "against my—my cousin?"

"No, darling, no; oh, deary me, how sorry I am. I dare say it is not true."

"And I say, that whether it is true or not, it is infamous to blame him."

"Don't be angry with me, darling," cried

Aunt Jerry pathetically. "I thought—I was afraid—I did it for the best, indeed I did, because I love you so. It is only for a few days —a week at most—that I shall be with you. Oh, pray forgive me. If I were in Heaven itself and felt that my darling was bitter against me I could not be happy."

"I am not bitter against you, Aunt Jerry; but I hate backbiters and slanderers."

"Deary me!" moaned the sick woman; never did ludicrous ejaculation sound so piteously.

"I am not classing *you* in that category," the girl hastened to add, "and though I think you were wrong to have repeated what they said, I am not angry with you; I am only hurt."

"Hurt? Oh, deary me, to think that I should have hurt my own heart's darling," cried the old lady; "give me your little hand to kiss and say you forgive poor Aunt Jerry."

Ruth stooped down and kissed her, tenderly enough; but she was not the radiant being that she had looked but a few minutes ago. The glory of youth and hope in her eyes was quenched; the colour of life had faded from her

face, and in its place was a marble whiteness as though a picture should have become a statue.

"I have done mischief," moaned the old lady; "harm where I had meant to help, my dear, forgive me."

"I have forgiven you, Aunt Jerry."

"You say so with your pretty lips, but do you feel it in your heart, Ruth?"

The girl nodded assent, and smiled an icy smile; not a glowing one such as she was wont to use, and one that vanished as quickly as it came.

"Then that is over, darling," put in the other eagerly; "let us talk of other things. There is something I wanted to say to you; something I wanted you to do for me. In my desk yonder are some papers. I want you to keep them for me; they must not fall into other hands when I am gone."

"What are they?"

"I don't quite know myself; but Jerry—poor fellow—told me never to part with them; so when he died, a ruined man, and Robert took everything else away from me as he did, I hid them from him."

"But if they are valuable I cannot keep them," answered Ruth.

"And yet I thought you said you had forgiven poor Aunt Jerry?"

"It is not a question of forgiveness," was the firm reply.

"I see," said the old lady quietly; "you are quite right. As I have left them—not that they are worth leaving, Jerry himself said they were worth nothing—in my will, it will be necessary for you to produce them. Please to keep them till the time comes."

In any other house it would have been a strange request to make; but even to Ruth her aunt's solicitude for the safety of her documents did not seem superfluous. She opened the desk and took out a moderately sized parcel carefully sealed. "It has my name upon it already," she observed.

"Yes, that was a precaution against accident; I have always intended you to take charge of it; and now it will be safe."

CHAPTER XXI.

HOOKING THEIR FISH.

When Ruth retired to her own room that night with her aunt's parcel in her hand she thought but little of what she carried. She put it mechanically into a drawer of her desk, and, having locked it, gave no more attention to the matter. Aunt Jerry had given her something else to think about, which could not be put in a drawer or forgotten. Was it possible that what had come to the ears of the old lady (as she had herself expressed it) about Lawrence and Kate Salesby was true? That it had not come to the ears of others was natural enough, for the maids, through whom it must have come, would have been naturally loth to speak of it to Lawrence's mother, and certainly disinclined to do so to their own master and mistress; they hated them too much, and would also be un-

willing to "make mischief" between them and Master Lawrence, who was a great favourite with them.

It was with no thought of doing harm, however, but probably the contrary, that they had told Aunt Jerry, with whom, to say truth, they were somewhat too familiar. She had never been encumbered with dignity, and in these latter days had become, in position, little superior to a servant herself. It was clear enough, in short, from whence the report had arisen; but the question which was so unfortunately pressing on Ruth's attention was, was it true? As she had said, even if it was true, it was no business of hers, nor of anybody's; so far as his affections at least were concerned, Lawrence was his own master; and he had not—no, he had not engaged them elsewhere. Ruth did not confess, even to herself, that she was in love with her cousin. A girl has not the freedom of a man in such a matter; she must not acknowledge that he whom she loves has won her affections till he has declared his love; and it had excessively annoyed Ruth, that Aunt Jerry had taken it for granted that she did love Lawrence. But so it was for

all that. What she had heard, therefore, had gone to her very heart. It gave her exquisite pain, but it did not rankle there, as it would have done had Lawrence been engaged to her and proved unfaithful; she had been spared *that* wretchedness; and, moreover, there was a mitigation of her misery in the reflection that Kate was not quite her equal; as regards family, indeed, the Salesbys were among the oldest in the county, but in position, education, feeling, Kate was obviously her inferior.

It was amazing to Ruth that one like Lawrence should have stooped to such a girl. She wondered (in her woman's way, which is so different from ours) how he could have been conquered by such feeble weapons as a pretty face, a graceful figure; if, indeed, he had been conquered. On the whole, though the idea distressed her, she did not believe it, and she was far less angry with Aunt Jerry for believing it than for the depreciatory terms in which she had spoken of Lawrence. "Not worthy of her!" The compliment to herself that that phrase implied did not one whit diminish her dislike of it. Lawrence was worthy of an angel, and she

felt herself far enough removed from any such heavenly body, whatever Aunt Jerry might think to the contrary. Even the old lady's affection for her was no excuse in Ruth's eyes. Such flattery, indeed, at her cousin's expense was hateful to her. Nor did she forget, or rather she now began for the first time to remember, that the old lady had dropped depreciatory remarks about him before; had hinted at his vanity, his selfishness. Vanity? Selfishness? How could he help being conscious of his superior intelligence? How could he help, situated as he was, a feeling of isolation, conveyed to others and by them misconstrued? The first person who, qualified by intelligence to judge of his character, had made his acquaintance, had appreciated him at once. Sir Charles Walden had said, "If your cousin is not a genius, Miss Ruth, he is a near relation to one." The baronet's praise of the lad was so welcome to her that she forgot to be angry with him for having had Aunt Jerry for his advocate. The old lady's notion of his being in love with her, though very distasteful, gave her little annoyance, for she did not believe it. She attributed

the idea to her relative's match-making instincts.

There had indeed been a time on the baronet's first coming to Hillsland when there had been that in his manner—she hardly knew what, but a something—which gave her some embarrassment. He had sometimes, even while he talked of Lawrence, looked at her, smiled at her, as if it were upon his own account that he was talking; his voice had sunk lower than it need have done, even when they were not conversing upon "the common enemy," as he called her uncle; he had paid her little compliments very gracefully, but which it had been nevertheless difficult to ignore. It was possible—though it had never struck her in that light till Aunt Jerry had given it such decisive shape—that Sir Charles had at one time been making love to her. But that it had not been so of late days she felt convinced. There had been a difference in his way with her, though it was by no means a less friendly way. Indeed, they had grown more familiar—more confidential even—with one another. His manner was no less tender, but had become more paternal. She had never been the least afraid of.

him, and certainly not of herself as regarded him, but what little embarrassment he at one time had caused her, no longer existed in their relations with one another. There was a tacit understanding between them, but not at all of the nature to which Aunt Jerry had alluded. Had it been otherwise—had matters even been on their former footing—what had just been said to her would have made all future intercourse between the baronet and herself strained and uncomfortable; but fortunately this was not the case. She could still like him as Lawrence's friend without fear of misunderstanding. She could not now, of course, be unaware of the significance, which in the eyes of Uncle Robert and Aunt Jane attached to such a "friendship;" but that troubled her very little. She did not hate those relatives as Lawrence hated them, nor, indeed, had she the same reason to do so, but she despised them even more.

When one of those opportunities of being alone together which were constantly being afforded to herself and Sir Charles, took place on the ensuing morning, the latter at once began to speak of their common topic, Lawrence.

"You have heard, I suppose, of your cousin's capture of Mr. Latham, the editor?"

"Indeed, I have not," she said, with eager interest.

"What, has he not told you? I should not have given him credit for such modest reticence. I saw him speaking to his mother this morning with such sparkling eyes, that though I did not hear a word, I am sure he was telling her all about it."

"He has not told me one word." Though there was no complaint in her tone, there was dejection in it. Sir Charles saw that she was pained, and pitied her: he was angry too with him who had caused her pain. "What a fool the boy is!" he said to himself. "What an idiot not to see where true sympathy is waiting for him, and to neglect this angel for a girl that —well, is not nearly so well suited for him. I'll warrant he has taken his news to 'The Corner,' where it will not even be understood."

Not a sign of this indignation, however, was to be seen in Sir Charles's face. "Well," he said, "I am sincerely obliged to my young friend for having permitted me to be the first bearer of

his good tidings to you. Mr. Latham is as much struck by the specimens of Lawrence's talent I sent him as an editor of thirty years' standing can be reasonably expected to be. He thinks quite as highly of it as I do, and his opinion is, of course, of much more consequence. He has accepted one of his stories—and even paid for it—and Lawrence is in the seventh heaven of happiness."

"I am so glad," cried Ruth; but her lips quivered and her voice faltered. "Oh, why," she seemed to be saying, "did he not let me share his happiness by telling me this news himself."

"Yes, Latham evidently thinks well of his prospects in literature — gives him great encouragement and even suggests that he should come up to town."

The colour left the girl's face. "And will he go?"

"He certainly seemed to be pleased at the idea. You must not blame him for that. It is only natural that——"

"I do not blame him," she interrupted hastily. "What right has any one to blame

him? If I seemed to be sorry it was but a passing selfishness. We shall miss him so—his mother and I, I mean—and it will make his time so short with us, for he is to go to Singapore, you know, at the end of the year."

"But his hope is that if he goes to London he will not go to Singapore at all."

"Oh, that would indeed please him, and be good for him, would it not?" she added hastily, as though conscious of having been too eager that he should be pleased.

"Yes, I think upon the whole it would be good for him; it will be well to remove him for the present from Hillsland, where in some respects—though not in all," put in the speaker with a smile, which Ruth would have fain ignored, "he is so unhappily situated; and better still, if it resulted in his permanently supporting himself without being indebted to his relatives."

"You do not say, 'or to his friends,' Sir Charles," observed Ruth gravely. "Of course, it is not for me to interfere in any plan for his benefit; but I fear you are taking some responsibility upon your shoulders, and that in his

natural desire to escape from thraldom, he may not consider—the—the——"

"The obligation," interposed the other with an amused look.

"Well, no, I did not quite mean that: I am sure Lawrence would be always grateful, and that in your case bounty would be as little grudged as felt; but there are some favours which, though offered in the most unselfish kindness by the giver, and though they may never be repented of by the recipient, one ought not to receive."

She hesitated, and the more so since the colour had risen in the other's usually impassive face. "I hope I have not angered you, Sir Charles."

"Angered me? That would be a difficult thing for you to do, my dear young lady, whatever you might please to say to me. It is very natural, and does you infinite credit, that you should look beyond the present gratification of your cousin and consider the loss of independence of character that might ensue from it."

"Yes, that is what I meant, if I could only have expressed myself, and also that Lawrence is so young, and has no friends in London, and we

—that is, his mother and I—are so ignorant of the world, that we have not even advice to offer him."

"Just so; all you say is most sensible and just. But as to the obligation there will be none at all. Lawrence has no extravagant notions. It will be easy for him to support himself in a humble way by his pen without assistance from anyone; and Latham's people are very nice and will look after him—so far you must allow me to be of service—just at first. I have thought that over."

"You are kind indeed: but his mother will have her fears; and there is another thing: if Lawrence leaves us, even temporarily, his uncle will make it the excuse for quarrel, will set his grandfather against him, cause him perhaps even to be renounced and cut off altogether."

"I have thought of that, too; my plan is to invite Lawrence to my own house. Against his being my visitor your people will not have a word to say. It is not likely that they will trouble themselves to inquire what he is doing; and while supposed to be under my roof, he may be trying his luck in London—feeling his wings as

it were—so that even if they fail him, there will no harm be done; he can but return, and go to Singapore after all."

"That is not very frank, is it?" said Ruth hesitatingly, "not quite straightforward?"

Again the colour came into Sir Charles's face.

"You know the people he has to deal with better than I do," he answered coldly. "If you think a bolder course more advisable, for Lawrence to lay before your uncle his little plan of escape——"

"Forgive me," she put in quickly. "No; that would be out of the question. It is easy to be conscientious when somebody else is taking all the responsibility off one's shoulders. I must seem to you ungrateful indeed."

She put out her hand to him with a sudden impulse, and he pressed it tenderly.

They both forgot for the moment that they were talking in the verandah within eye-shot of the breakfast-room windows. Uncle Robert and Aunt Jane were both standing there, and motives of delicacy had not restrained them from making use of the opportunity.

"Did you see *that?*" murmured Uncle Robert significantly.

"Well, of course I did; it's what I've been expecting to see for a good many days," replied his sister. "It would have been hard indeed if all the trouble and expense the man has caused us all this time had gone for nothing."

"Oh —— the expense," said Robert generously. "You can't hook your fish without gear."

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